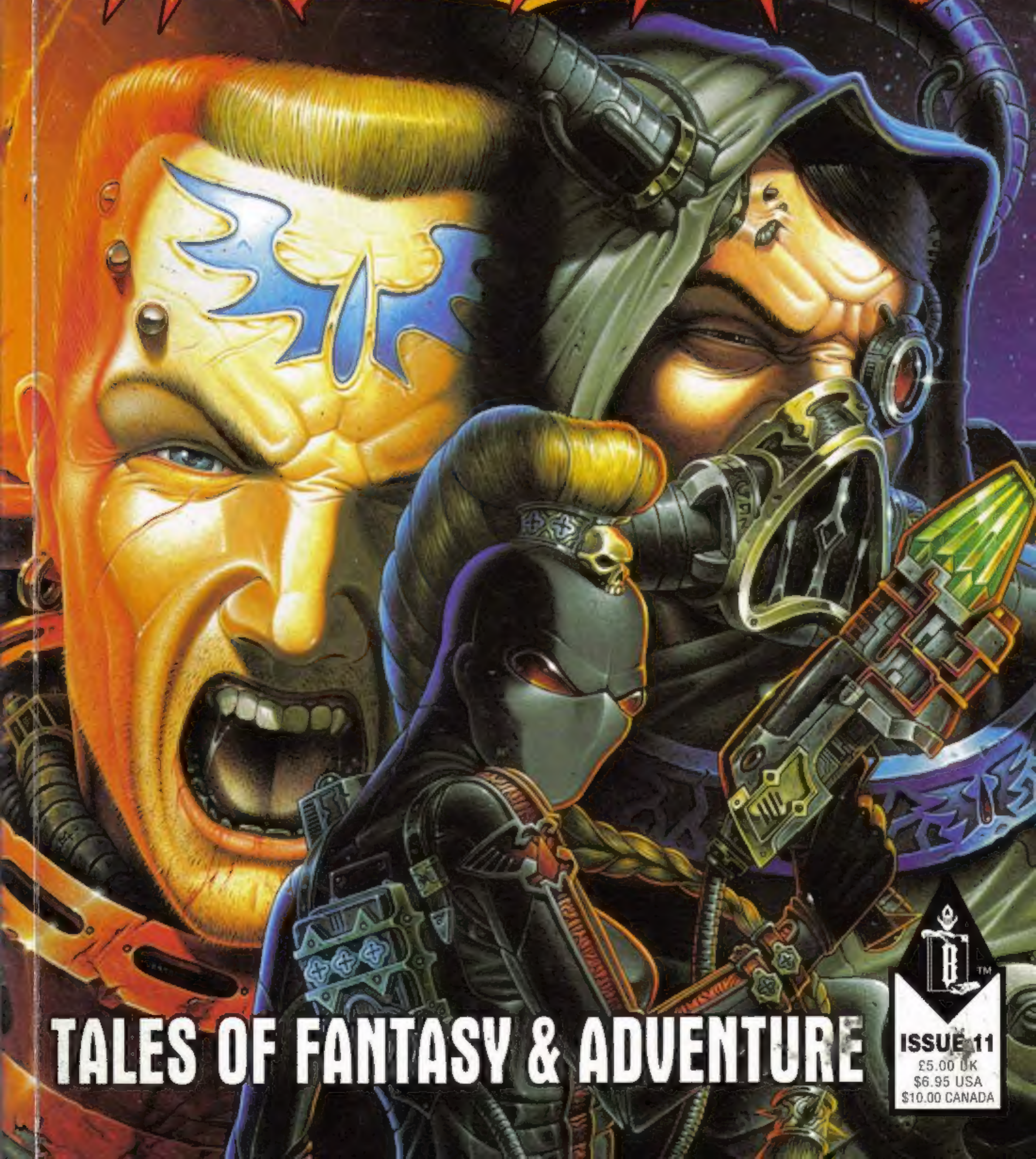


INTERNO!



TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



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E EK! IT'S 5.25, and Marco tells me I have to knock out this editorial in the next five minutes or else this page will be kinda blank. So what is there to say about *Inferno!* #11 that is so different to any of the other awesome issues, packed as they all are with storming action stories?

Firstly, though we didn't have room for a 'roll of honour page' in the issue, there are plenty of new arrivals: Matthew Farrer, Rani Kellock, John Gravato and Martin Hanford all grace the *Inferno!* pages for the first time.

So, take heart, all of you budding new writers or artists out there. This issue is proof that the door to the *Inferno!* is still very much open if you think you've got what it takes. (And if you do think you've got talent to spare, as a writer or an artist, drop us a line at the address that's floating around in a box somewhere on this page, and ask for a copy of our guidelines.)



The other coincidence (or is it a conspiracy?) is that, apart from the legendary Bill King, all the authors of this issue's stories are from Down Under. Rani, Matthew and Alex all hail from one part or another of Australia. Is there some sort of link between sunshine and creative writing, I wonder? In my experience heat and sun just cause a greater need for beer, deck chairs and sunshades, but I guess it takes other folks in different ways...

M MM. SO how do we counter this somewhat Antipodean tendency? Aha, I've got it! I know what we need: a bunch of action packed stories from the darker, wetter, colder, grimmer corners of the world (Huddersfield, for example), would be most appreciated in restoring the balance. Otherwise I can see *Inferno!* turning into some kind of Surf Dudes Monthly, and that way surely ends in that most repellent of conclusions: stories with happy endings. Which simply won't do.

Some come on, all you downtrodden scribes of the twilit North, sharpen your biros and get writing. The gauntlet of Oz (magical, I believe, +2 against wombats) has been thrown down as a challenge!

Andy Jones
Editor

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• ULRIC'S CHILDREN •

A Gotrek & Felix story by Bill King

THE HOWLING of the wolves echoed through the forest like the wailing of damned souls in torment. Felix Jaeger pulled his red Sudenland wool cloak tight and trudged on through the snow.

Over the past two days, he had twice seen their pursuers, catching glimpses of them in the shadows beneath the endless pines. They were long, lean shapes, tongues lolling, eyes blazing with ravenous hunger. Twice the wolves had come almost within striking distance and twice they had withdrawn, summoned by the howling of some distant leader, a creature so frightful that it had to be obeyed.

When he thought of that long wailing call, Felix shuddered. There had been a note of horror and intelligence in its cry that brought to mind the old tales of the darkened woods with which his nurse had frightened him as a child. He tried to dismiss such evil thoughts.

He told himself he had merely heard the howling of the pack leader, a creature larger and more fearsome than the others. And, by Sigmar, the howling of wolves was a dismal enough sound without letting his mind populate this forest with monsters.

The snow crunched below his feet. Chilly wetness seeped through his cracked leather boots and into the thick woollen socks he wore beneath them. This was another bad sign. He had heard of woodsmen whose feet had been frozen solid within their boots, who had to have their toes pared off with knives before gangrene set in.

He was not really surprised at finding himself lost deep in the heart of the Reikwald just as winter was setting in. Felix fought down a surge of panic. It was all too possible that they would trudge around in circles until they died of exhaustion or starvation; it had happened to other travellers lost in the woods in

winter. Or until the wolves picked them off, he reminded himself. Not for the first time, Felix cursed the day he ever encountered the Dwarf Trollslayer, Gotrek Gurnisson, and sworn to follow him and record his doom in an epic poem. They had been following the tracks of a large monster that Gotrek swore was a Troll when the snow had started to fall. They had lost the trail in the whiteout and now were completely lost.

The Dwarf looked just as miserable as Felix. He trudged along using the haft of his huge axe like a walking stick to test the depth of the snow ahead of him. The great ridge of red dyed hair that normally towered above his shaved and tattooed head drooped like the crest of some bedraggled bird. The sullen madness that glittered in his one good eye seemed subdued by their dismal surroundings. A great blob of snot dripped from his broken nose.

'Trees!' Gotrek grumbled. 'The only things I hate more than trees are Elves.'

Another piercing howl pulled Felix out of his reverie. It was like those earlier cries, full of malign intelligence and hunger, and it filled Felix with blind primordial fear. Instinctively he flicked his cloak over his shoulder to free his sword arm and reached for the hilt of his blade.

'No need for that, manling.' Malicious amusement was evident in the Dwarf's harsh flinty voice. 'Whatever it is, it's calling our furry little friends away from us. It seems like they've found other prey.'

'The Children of Ulric...' Felix said fearfully, remembering his nurse's old tales.

'What's the wolf-god of Middenheim got to do with it, manling?'

'They say that when the world was young, Ulric walked among men and begat children of mortal women. That those of his bloodline could shift shapes

between that of man and wolf. They withdrew to the wild places of the world long ago. Some say their blood grew tainted when Chaos came and now they feast on human flesh.'

'Well, if any of them should come within reach of my axe I'll spill some of that tainted blood.'

Suddenly Gotrek raised his hand, gesturing for silence. After a moment he nodded and spat on the ground.

Felix paused fearfully, watching and listening. Nowhere could he make out any sign of pursuit. The wolves had vanished. For a moment all he could hear was his own pounding heart, the rasping of his breath. Then he heard what had caused the Trollslayer to stop: the sounds of a struggle, battlecries, and the distant howling of wolves drifted on the wind.

'Sounds like a fight,' he said.

'Lets go kill some wolves,' Gotrek said cheerily. 'Maybe whoever they are attacking knows the way out of this hell-spawned, tree-infested place.'



PANTING FROM THE run through the thick snow drifts, face stinging from where branches and briars had torn at him, Felix bounded into the clearing. A dozen crossbows swung to cover him. The smell of ozone filled the air. The corpses of men and wolves lay everywhere.

Slowly Felix raised his hands high. His gasping breath clouded the air in front of him and sweat ran down his face, despite the cold. He would have to remember that it was not a good idea to run through the winter woods in heavy clothing. That was, if he was still alive to remember anything after this. The heavily-armed strangers looked anything but friendly.

There were at least twenty of them. Several were garbed in the rich furs of nobles. They held swords and gave orders to the others: tough-looking, watchful men-at-arms. For all their competence, there was an air of deep unease about all these men. Fear was in their eyes. Felix

knew that he was instants away from being pin-cushioned by crossbow bolts.

'Don't shoot!' he said. 'I'm here to help.'

He wondered where Gotrek was. He had run for quite a distance. In the heat of the moment, he had let his excitement and his longer legs carry him in front of the Dwarf. Right now that might prove to be a fatal mistake, although he was not sure what even the Trollslayer could do faced with this glittering array of missile weapons.

'Oh you are, are you?' a sarcastic voice said. 'Just out for a walk in the woods, were you? Heard the sounds of a scuffle. Come to investigate this little disturbance, did you?'

The speaker was a tall nobleman. Felix had never cared much for the Empire's nobility, and this man seemed like a prime example of the worst of that pox-ridden breed. A trim black beard framed his narrow face. Startling dark eyes glared out of his pale features. A great eagle beak of a nose gave his face a predatory air.

'My friend and I were lost in the forest. We heard the wolves and the sounds of battle. We came to help, if we could.'

'Your friend?' the nobleman asked ironically. He jerked a thumb towards a tall, beautiful young woman who huddled chained nearby. 'Do you mean this witch?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about, sir,' Felix said. 'I've never seen that young lady before in my life.'

He glanced around him. The Dwarf was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it was just as well, Felix thought. The Trollslayer was not known for his tact. Doubtless right now he would be saying something that would get them both killed.

'I was travelling with a compan...' It dawned on Felix that it might not be such a good idea to mention Gotrek right now. The Trollslayer was a conspicuous figure and an outlaw, and perhaps these men might want to claim the bounty, if they recognised him.

'He appears to have got lost,' Felix finished off weakly.

'Put down your sword,' the noble said. Felix complied. 'Sven! Heinrich! Bind his hands!'

Two of the men-at-arms raced forward to obey. Felix found himself shoved to the ground. He fell face-first into the snow, and felt the chill wetness of it begin to seep into his tunic.

He opened his eyes and found he was lying in front of the corpse of a wolf. As he gazed into the creature's death-clouded eyes, the soldiers swiftly and efficiently bound his hands behind his back. Felix felt cold metal bite into his wrists and was surprised to find that they were using more than mere rope to hold him.

Then someone tugged down the hood of his cloak and pulled his head up by the hair. Foul breath assaulted his nostrils. Coldly crazy eyes gazed deep into his own. He looked up into a lined, male face, framed by a greyish beard. A gnarled hand made a gesture in front of his face. As it swept through the air, it left behind a trail of glittering sparks. Quite obviously this old man was a magician.

'He seems untouched by the taint of Chaos,' the sorcerer said, in a surprisingly mellow and cultured voice. 'It may be that he tells the truth. I'll know more when we get him back to the Lodge.'

Felix was allowed to slump forward into the snow once more. He recognised the voice of the nobleman.

'Even so, take no chances with him, Voorman. If he is a spy for our enemies, I want him dead.'

'I'll find out the truth once I have my instruments. If he's a spy for enemies of the Order, we'll know!'

The noble shrugged and turned away; the matter was beneath his concern. A boot hit Felix in the ribs again and knocked all the air out of his lungs. 'Get up and get on the sledge,' a burly sergeant was saying. 'If you fall off, I'll kill you.'

Felix drew his legs underneath himself and reeled to his feet. He glared at the sergeant, trying to memorise every line of the man's face. If he got out of this alive, he would have vengeance. Seeing his look, one of the men-at-arms drew back the butt of his crossbow as if to brain Felix. The magician shook his head mildly.

'None of that. I want him undamaged.'

Felix shivered. There was something

more frightening in the magician's calm detachment than in the soldier's brutality. He climbed on to the back of the sledge.



AS FAR AS Felix could tell, the party consisted of the nobleman, some of his toadies, the men-at-arms, and the mage. The nobles rode in horse-drawn sledges. The soldiers clung to the running boards or sat up front driving.

Beside him sat the young woman. Her hair was pure silver and her eyes were golden. She had a sleek predatory beauty and a naturally haughty bearing that was in no way diminished by the collar and chain that attached her to the back railing of the sledge, or the strange rune-encrusted metal shackles that bound her hands behind her back.

'Felix Jaeger,' he murmured by way of introduction. She said nothing, merely smiled coldly and turned away. She gave no further acknowledgement of his presence.

'Be silent,' the magician sitting opposite them hissed, and there was more menace in his calm, quiet tone than there was in all the angry glares of the guardsmen combined.

Felix decided nothing could be gained by defying the old man. He cast another look around the forest, hoping to see some sign of Gotrek but the Trollslayer was nowhere in evidence. Felix lapsed into morose silence. He doubted that the Dwarf could overtake them now, but he could at least follow the tracks of the sleds – providing it didn't snow too heavily.

And then what? Felix did not know. He had every respect for Gotrek's formidable powers of slaughter and destruction, but he doubted that even the Trollslayer could overcome this small army.

Occasionally he risked a glance at the woman beside him, noting that she too was casting anxious glances towards the trees. He could not decide whether she was hoping that friends would come to her rescue or was simply measuring the distance of a dash for freedom. A wolf

howled in the distance. A strange, inhuman smile twisted the woman's lips. Felix shuddered and looked away.



FELIX WAS ALMOST glad when the manor house loomed out of the gathering storm. The low, massive outline of the lodge was partially obscured by the drifting snowflakes. Felix could see that it was built from stone and logs, in the style people called half-timbered. He felt weary beyond belief. Hunger, cold and the long trudge through the snow had brought him almost to the end of his strength. It occurred to him that this was their destination and that here he would be prey for whatever foul schemes the wizard had in mind, but he simply could not muster the energy to care. All he wanted was to lie down somewhere warm and sleep.

Someone sounded a horn and the gates were swung open. The sleds and the accompanying men-at-arms passed through into a courtyard, and then the gates were closed behind them.

Felix had a chance to glance around the courtyard. It was flanked on all four sides by the walls of the fortified manor house. He revised his earlier opinion. It was not so much a hunting lodge as a fortress, built to withstand a siege if need be. He cursed: his chances of escape seemed slimmer than ever.

All around, the party climbed down from the sledges. The nobles called for hot mulled wine. Someone ordered the drivers to see that the horses were stabled. All was bustling disorder. The breath of men and beasts emerged from their mouths like smoke.

The guards bundled Felix into the building. Inside it was cold and damp. It smelled of earth and pine and old woodsmoke. A massive stone fireplace filled the centre of the entrance chamber. The warriors and nobles stamped about inside, windmilling their arms and hugging themselves against the chill. Servants rushed forward bearing goblets

of hot spicy wine. The scent of it made Felix's mouth water.

One of the warriors hastily laid kindling in the fire and then set to work, striking sparks from a flint. The damp wood refused to catch. The wizard watched with growing impatience, then shrugged, gestured and spoke a word in the ancient tongue. A small burst of flame leapt from the end of his pointed index finger to the wood in the fireplace. The wood hissed, then roared. A stink like burnt metal filled the air as blue flames flickered around the wood, then the logs all caught fire at once. Shadows danced away from the fireplace.

The nobles and the wizard passed through one of the doors into another chamber, leaving the warriors and the prisoners alone. Tense silence reigned for a moment, then all the men began to speak at once. All the words that they had held in during the long trek to the lodge tumbled from the soldiers' mouths.

'By Sigmar's Hammer, what a fight that was. I thought those wolves were going to have our nuts for sure!'

'I'd never been so frightened as when I saw the hairy beasts loping out of the trees. Those teeth looked plenty sharp.'

'Yeah but they died quick enough when you put a crossbow bolt through their eyes or twelve inches of good Empire steel through their mangy hides!'

'It wasn't natural, though. I've never even heard of wolves attacking such a large party! I've never seen wolves fight so hard or long either.'

'I think we can blame the witch for that!'

The girl returned their stares impassively until none of them met her gaze. Felix noticed that her eyes were quite unusual; in the gathering gloom, they reflected the light of the fire like those of a hound would.

'Yeah, just as well we had the wizard with us. Old Voorman showed them what real magic is and no mistake!'

'I wonder why the count wants her?'

At this, a chill smile passed over the girl's face. Her teeth were small and white and very, very sharp. When she spoke her voice was low and thrilling and strangely musical.

'Your Count Hrothgar is a fool of he thinks he can hold me here, or kill me without my death being avenged. You are fools if you think you will ever leave this place alive.'

The sergeant drew back his hand and struck her with his gauntleted fist. The outline of his palm stood out stark and pink on her cheek where the blow fell. Anger blazed in the girl's eyes so hot and hellish and fierce that the sergeant shrank back as if he himself had been the one struck. The girl spoke again and her words were cold and measured.

'Hear me! I have the gift of the Sight. The veils of the future do not blind me. Every one of you, every single lackey of Count Hrothgar, will die. You will not leave this place alive!'

Such was the compelling certainty in her voice that every man present froze. Faces went white with fear. Men glanced at each other in horror. Felix himself did not doubt her words. The burly sergeant was first to rouse himself. He slid his dagger from its sheath and walked over to the girl. He held the blade before her eyes.

'Then you will be the first to die, witch,' he said. The girl looked at him unafraid. He drew back his blade to strike. Filled with a sudden rage, Felix threw himself forward. Weighed down with chains, he cannoned into the man and knocked him from his feet. He heard a low gurgle come from the man he had hit and felt a stab of savage exultation at taking some small revenge on the man who had struck him.

The other soldiers dragged him to his feet. Blows slammed into his body. Stars danced before his eyes. He fell to the ground, curling himself into a ball as heavy booted feet crunched into him. He pulled his head against his chest and drew his knees up to his stomach as the pain threatened to overwhelm him. A kick caught him under the chin, throwing his head back. Darkness took him momentarily. Now he was really scared. The angry soldiers were likely to keep up this punishment until he was dead and there was nothing he could do about it.

'Stop!' bellowed a voice he recognised as the sorcerer's. 'Those two are my property. Do not damage either of them!'

The kicking stopped. Felix was manhandled to his feet. He looked around him wildly, then he noticed the spreading pool of red liquid on the floor that surrounded the recumbent form of the sergeant.

One of the soldiers crouched to turn the man over and Felix noticed the knife protruding from the sergeant's chest. The sergeant's eyes were wide and staring. His face was white. His chest did not rise and fall. He must have fallen on the blade when Felix had knocked him over.

'Throw them in the cellar,' the sorcerer said. 'I will have words with them both later.'

'The dying has begun!' the girl said with a note of triumph in her voice. She looked at the spreading pool of blood and licked her lips.



THE CELLAR WAS damp. It smelled of wood and metal and stuff contained in barrels.

Felix caught the scent of smoked meat and cheeses as well. It just made him hungrier than he already was; he remembered he had not eaten in two days.

A clink of chains reminded him of the girl. He sensed her presence in the dark. He heard her shallow breathing. She was somewhere close by.

'What is your name, lady,' Felix asked. For a long time there was silence, and he wondered if she was going to answer.

'Katarina.'

'What are you doing here? Why are you in chains?'

Another long silence.

'The soldiers believe you are a witch. Are you?'

'No.'

A further silence.

'But you have the second sight and the wolves fought for you.'

'Yes.'

'You're not very communicative, are you?'

'Why should I be?'

'Because we both appear to be in the same boat and perhaps together we can escape.'

'There is no escape. There is only death here. Soon it will be night. Then my father will come.'

She made the statement as if she was convinced that it was a complete answer. There was the same mad certainty in her voice, as convincing as it had been when she predicted death for all of the armed men upstairs.

In spite of himself, Felix shuddered. It was not pleasant to think that he was alone in a dark basement with a madwoman. It was less pleasant to consider the alternative to her being mad.

'What do they want with you?'

'I am the bait in a snare for my father.'

'Why does the Count want you dead?'

'I do not know. For generations my people have lived at peace with the Count's folk. But Hrothgar is not like his forefathers. He has changed. There is a taint about him, and his pet wizard.'

'How did they capture you?'

'Voorman is a sorcerer. He tracked me with spells. His magic was too strong for me. But soon my father will come for me.'

'Your father must be a mighty man indeed if he can overcome all the occupants of this castle.'

There was no answer except soft, panting laughter. Felix knew that the sooner he got out of here the better.



THE DOOR LEADING into the cellar was thrown open. A shaft of light illuminated the dark. Heavy footsteps marked the approach of the wizard, Voorman. He held a lantern in his hand and leaned on a heavy staff. He twisted his head up to look Felix in the face.

'Having an interesting chat with the monster, were you, boy?'

Something in the man's tone rankled. 'She is not a monster. She is only a sad, deluded young woman.'

'You would not say that if you knew the truth, boy. If I were to remove those shackles binding her, your sanity would be blasted in an instant.'

'Really,' Felix said with some irony. The magician tittered.

'So sure of yourself, eh? So ignorant of the way the world really is. What would you say, boy, if I told you that cults devoted to the worship of Chaos riddle our land, that soon we will overthrow all that exists of order here in the Empire.' The wizard sounded almost boastful.

'I would say that you are, perhaps, correct.' Felix could see that his reply surprised the sorcerer, that Voorman had expected the usual casual denial of such things one usually expected from the educated classes of the Empire.

'You interest me, boy. Why do you say that?'

Felix wondered why he had said that himself. He was admitting to knowledge that could get him burned at the stake if a Witch Hunter overheard him. Still, right now, he was cold and tired and hungry, and he did not like being patronised by this irritating and supercilious mage.

'Because I have seen the evidence of it with my own eyes.'

He heard a sharp intake of breath from the wizard, and sensed now that perhaps for the first time he had got his full attention.

'Really? The Time of Changes is coming, eh? Arakkkai Nidlek Zarug Tzeentch?' Voorman paused as if expecting a reply. His head tilted to one side. He rubbed his nose with one long, bony finger. His foul breath filled Felix's nostrils.

Felix wondered what was going on. The words were spoken in a language he had heard before, during the rituals of depraved cultists that he and Gotrek had interrupted one Geheimnismacht. The name 'Tzeentch' was all too familiar and frightening; it belonged to one of the darkest of dark powers. Slowly the air of expectancy passed from Voorman.

'No, you are not one of the Chosen. And yet you know the words of our Litany or some of them. I can see that in your eyes. I don't think you are part of the Order. How can this be?'

It was obvious that the sorcerer did not expect an answer, that the last question was asked more of himself than of Felix. Suddenly there came the sound of the baying of many wolves outside the keep. The wizard flinched and then smiled. 'That will be my other guest arriving. I must go soon. He slipped through the net earlier but I knew he would come back for the girl.'

The wizard checked the chains that held Katarina. He inspected the runes on them closely and then, apparently satisfied with what he saw, he smirked and turned and limped away. As he passed he looked at Felix. The younger man felt his flesh crawl. He knew that the wizard was deciding whether or not to kill him. Then the sorcerer smiled.

'No – there's time enough later. I would talk more with you before you die, boy!'

As the wizard shut the door behind him and the light died, Felix felt horror mount within his soul.



FELIX WAS NOT aware of how long he lay there with despair growing in his heart. He was trapped in the dark with no weapons and only a madwoman for company. The wizard intended to murder him. He had no idea where the Trollslayer was, or if he had any hope of rescue. It was possible that Gotrek was lost in the woods somewhere. Slowly it dawned on him that if he was going to get out of this, he was going to have to do it for himself.

It did not look good. His hands were chained behind his back. He was hungry and tired, ill with cold and weariness. The bruises from the beating earlier pained him. The key to his chains was on the belt of the wizard. He had no weapon.

Well, one thing at a time, he told himself. *Let's see what I can do about the chains.*

He hunkered into a squat, drawing his knees up to his chest. The chains pooled around his ankles, then by dint of wriggling and squirming, he drew his

arms underneath him so that he they were in front of his body. The effort left him breathing hard and he felt like he had pulled his arms from his sockets, but at least now he could move more freely and the length of heavy coiled chain he held in his hands could be used as a weapon. He swung it before him experimentally. There was a swish as it cut through the air.

The girl laughed as if she understood what he was doing. Now he moved forward cautiously, placing one foot ahead of him gently testing the ground like a man might who was on the edge of a cliff. He did not know what he might stumble over in the darkness, but he felt it was wisest to be careful. This would be a bad time to fall and dislocate an ankle.

His caution was rewarded when he felt a stairway under his foot. Slowly, carefully he worked his way up the steps. As far as he remembered they had not curved in anyway. Eventually his outstretched hands struck wood. The chains clinked together softly as they swung. Felix froze and listened. It seemed to him that somewhere, far off, he could hear sounds of men fighting and wolves howling.

Wonderful, he thought sourly. The wolves had somehow got inside the manor. He pictured the long lean shapes racing through the hunting lodge, and a desperate battle between man and beast taking place mere paces from where he stood. It was not a reassuring thought.

For long moments he stood undecided and then he pushed against the door. It did not move. He cursed himself and fumbled for a handle. His fingers clutched a cool metal ring. He twisted and pulled it towards him, and the door opened. He was looking up a long flight of stairs, dimly illuminated by a guttering lantern. He reached out for the light, then thought about the girl.

However strange she was, she was also a prisoner here. He was not going to abandon her to the tender mercies of Voorman. He edged back down the stairs and gestured for her to follow him. He caught sight of her face. It was pale and strained and feral. Her eyes definitely did catch the light like those of some animal. There was a ferocious, inhuman aspect to

her whole appearance that did not reassure Felix in the slightest. He moved towards the head of the stairs but the girl pushed past him.

Felix was glad not to have those fierce eyes of hers burning into his back.



THE SOUNDS OF fighting became clearer: wolves bayed; war cries rang out. Katarina opened the door at the head of the stairs. They found themselves once more amid the mansion's corridors. The place was deserted. All the guards appeared to have been drawn towards the sounds of battle. A line of doorways edged the corridor. At one end a flight of stairs led upwards. At the other, there was a doorway, beyond which was the sound of battle. Felix's nostrils twitched. He thought he smelled burning. Somewhere in the distance horses whinnied with terror.

Discretion told him to head for the stairs, to get away from the sounds of fighting. He was not part of either faction here, and discovery might prove fatal for him. The longer the others fought the more the odds against him were whittled down, and the more chance he had of escaping.

Katarina, however, felt differently. She moved towards the doorway at the end of the corridor, the one that led towards the battle. Felix grabbed her chains and tugged. She did not stop. Although he was taller and heavier, she was surprisingly strong.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Where do you think?'

'Don't be stupid. There's nothing you can do there.'

'What do you know?'

'Let us look around. Perhaps upstairs we can find a way to remove these chains.'

For a moment, she stood undecided but the last point appeared to sway her. Together they moved up the stairs. Behind them, the howls and shouting reached a crescendo, then abruptly ceased. For a moment, Felix wondered what had

happened. Had the wolves overcome the defenders?

Then the men-at-arms began to shout at each other once more. Felix heard nobler voices tell the men to drag the wounded inside and he realised that the men had won – at least for a while.



AT THE TOP of the stairs, a window looked down into the courtyard of the lodge. He could see that there were dozens of dead wolves down there and maybe five dead men. Blood reddened the snow.

'How the hell did that gate get open?' he heard Count Hrothgar yelling. Felix wondered the same himself, for he could see that the wooden gate lay wide open. The wolves had come right through it. Then he saw the thing, and he wondered no more. On the roof of the stables lay a grey shape, half man and half wolf. The hairs on the back of Felix's neck prickled. The man-wolf rose and dropped back out of sight, leaving Felix wondering if he had imagined the whole thing. He prayed to Sigmar that he had done so but somehow, in his heart of hearts, he doubted it. It looked like Ulric's Children were here.

'Let us go on,' he muttered and turned and headed down the corridor.

They entered a library. Bookcases so high that one would need a ladder to reach the highest volumes lined the walls. Felix was surprised by the size of it. Count Hrothgar had not seemed to him to be a scholar but this was worthy of the chambers of one of Felix's former professors at the University of Altdorf. His guess was that this was the wizard's place.

Felix ran his eyes over the titles. Most seemed to be written in High Classical, the tongue of scholars across the Old World. The ones he could see mostly concerned voyages of exploration, ancient myths and legends and lorebooks compiled from the Dwarfish.

On the desk ahead of him was an open book. Felix walked over and picked it up. The tome was bound in leather, with no

title embossed on its spine. The parchment pages were thick and coarse, obviously ancient. For all the thickness of the book there were surprisingly few pages. It was not a printed volume set in the movable typefaces perfected by the Guild of Printers. It was done in the old style, hand-copied and illuminated around the borders. Felix picked it up and began to read – and soon wished he had not.

Katarina obviously noticed the look on his face. ‘What is it? What’s wrong? What does it say?’

‘It’s a grimoire of sorts... it deals with magic of a certain type.’

Indeed it did. Felix laboriously translated the Classical and a thrill of horror made him shiver. As far as he could tell, it appeared to be a spell of soul transmutation, an invocation designed to let a man switch his very essence with that of another, to steal their shape and form. If the claims of the book were true, it would allow the sorcerer to take possession of another’s body.

In another time, at another place, Felix would have found the whole thing ludicrous. In this isolated manor, it all seemed rather likely. The madness of it did not seem out of place here.

None of this reassured Felix. He was trapped here by a group of mad cultists and their men-at-arms. The keep was surrounded by hungry wolves and cut off by a winter blizzard. As if that weren’t bad enough, if his suspicions were true, there were not one but two werewolves within the walls of the fortress. And one of them was standing right behind him.

Felix’s flesh crawled.



THEY MOVED ON through the second floor of the castle, down corridors lit by flickering torches and echoing with the howling of wolves. A faint unpleasant odour, as of wet fur and blood, reached Felix’s nostrils just before they turned a corner. He poked his head round cautiously and saw the corpse of a man-at-arms lying there. The soldier’s eyes were

wide open. Great claws had ripped his chest. His face was as white as a vampire. Blood poured from where huge jaws had ripped out his jugular.

A sword lay near the dead man’s hand. There was a dagger at his belt. Felix turned to look at the girl. She was smiling evilly. Felix felt like taking up the sword and striking her but he did not. The thought occurred to him that maybe he could use her as a hostage and strike a deal with the man-wolf. He turned it over in his mind and then dismissed it as being at once impractical and dishonourable.

Instead he bent over the man and fumbled for his dagger. It was a long, needle-sharp blade almost as thin as a stiletto. He considered the lock of his chains: it was large and cumbersome and crudely made. He picked the blade up with his right hand and thrust it down into the lock of the manacle on his left wrist. He felt mechanisms move as the point went home. For long tense moments, he twisted and prodded. Then there was a click and the manacle opened. A weight fell from Felix’s shoulders as the chain slid from his wrist. He tried repeating the process for the right hand chain but his left hand was clumsier and it took him longer.

Seconds stretched into minutes and he kept imagining that awful wolf-headed shape creeping up on him as he did so. Eventually there was a click and his other hand was free. He turned triumphantly and the smile faded from his lips.

The girl was gone.



FELIX CREPT cautiously through the manor house. The wolves were quiet once more. In his hands, the sword felt as heavy as death. He had come across two more dead guards in his wanderings through the hall. Both their throats were torn out. Both had died with looks of horror on their face. The peculiar, musk-like smell filled the air.

Felix considered his options. He could make a run for it out through the

courtyard. That did not seem sensible. Outside, snow covered the ground and wolves filled the woods. Even without their malevolent presence he doubted he would get very far without food or winter gear.

Inside the mansion was a sorcerer who wanted to kill him and the Children of Ulric. Plus a whole crew of scared men-at-arms to whom he was a stranger. That did not look too promising either.

Common sense dictated that he find some place to hide and wait for one side to slaughter the other. Maybe upstairs he could find an attic in which to hide, or maybe there was some quiet room in which...

Voices approached. The door at the end of the corridor started to open. Swiftly Felix pushed the door beside him open and ducked through, pulling it closed behind him. He realised he must be in Count Hrothgar's study. A massive desk sat under the window. Family portraits glared down from the walls. A burnished suit of armour stood sentry in an alcove and curtained drapes covered the windows.

Some instinct prodded Felix to race across the room and dive behind the drapes. He was just in time. The door to the chamber swung open. Two men talked loudly. Felix recognised their voices. One was the Count. The other was the sorcerer.

'Damn! Voorman – I thought you said your chains held them as fast as the clutches of Daemons. How could they have disappeared?'

'The spells were not broken. I would have sensed it. I suspect some more mundane means. Perhaps one of your people...'

'Are you suggesting that one of my men could be in league with those things?'

'Or one of your servants. They stay here all year round. Who knows? The Children of Ulric have lived in this area longer than you. They say the folk about here used to worship them, or at least sacrifice to them.'

'Maybe. Maybe. But can you find the prisoners? They can't just have disappeared into thin air. And what about

my men? Over half are dead and the other half are frightened out of their wits, jumping at shadows. You'd best do something soon, wizard, or you will have some explaining to the Magister Magistorum. Things are not going as you promised the Order they would.'

'Don't panic, excellency. My magic will prevail and the cause will be stronger for it. The Time of Changes is coming, and you and I will have worked some of Tzeentch's strongest magic. We will be immortal and unkillable.'

'Perhaps. But right now at least one of the beasts is loose within these walls. Maybe two, if you were wrong about the youth.'

'No matter. The spell of Transmutation is ready. Soon final victory will be ours. I go to find our vessel.'

'You go to find our vessel, do you wizard? You plan treachery, more like. Be careful! The Magister gave me the means to deal with you, should you prove unfaithful to the Order!'

There was a ringing of steel as a weapon was drawn.

'Put it away, Count.' The wizard sounded nervous now. 'You do not know the power of such a thing. There will be no need for its use.'

'Make sure that is so, Voorman. Make sure that is so.'

A door opened then closed. Felix heard the Count slump down into his chair. Briefly he wondered about this Order. Who was this mysterious Magister? Mostly likely the head of some unspeakable cult. Felix dismissed the thought. He had other things to worry about.

He pulled the curtain to one side and saw the bald spot at back of the Count's head. A dagger lay on the desk in front of him. It was covered in strange glowing runes. Trying to follow their lines hurt Felix's eyes. Still, he thought, the dagger might be useful.

The Count rubbed his neck, feeling the cold draft from the window behind him. He began to reach for the dagger. Felix leapt from his place of concealment and brought the pommel of sword down on the Count's skull. The nobleman fell like a pole-axed ox.

Gingerly Felix reached out for the dagger. His skin prickled as he brought his hand near the blade. A dangerous energy radiated from the thing. He picked it up by the hilt and noticed that the handle was wrapped with dull metal: lead. He realised that he had seen a glow like that from the blade before.

It looked like Warpstone had been used in the creation of this dagger. This was a weapon that could be as dangerous to its user as to its victim. He reached down and found the sheath the Count had drawn the weapon from. It was lined with lead. Felix felt a bit better after he had returned the weapon to its sheath.

He considered discarding the dagger, but only briefly. In this hellish place, it might prove the only protection he would find. He buckled the sheath around his waist and got ready to move on.



THERE WERE THREE dead servants in the kitchen. They, too, had their throats torn out. It looked like the man-wolf intended to slay everyone in the mansion. Felix did not doubt that he would be included in that reckoning.

Looking at the dead bodies was almost enough to put Felix off his food. Almost. He had found fresh-made bread on the table and cheese and beef in the larder. He gulped them down hungrily. They seemed like the best food he had ever tasted.

The door opened and two wild-eyed soldiers entered. They looked at the corpses and then looked at him. Fear filled their eyes. Felix reached for the naked sword on the table.

'You killed them,' one of the men said, pointing an accusing finger.

'Don't be stupid,' Felix said, his words muffled by the bread and cheese filling his mouth. He swallowed. 'Their throats were ripped out. It was the beast.'

The men paused, undecided. They seemed too afraid to attack and yet filled with fear-fuelled rage.

'You've seen it?' one asked eventually. Felix nodded.

'What was it like?'

'Big! Head like a wolf. Body of a man.'

An eerie howl echoed through the halls. It sounded close. The men turned and bolted for the door into the courtyard. As they did so, lean grey shapes sprang on them and pulled them down. Wolves had been waiting silently outside.

Felix raced forward but was too late to help the men. Looking out he saw that the main gate was once again open. What looked like the girl stood near it. Her head was thrown back. She appeared to be laughing.

Hastily Felix slammed the door shut and threw the bolts. He was trapped but at least whatever had howled had not come any closer. He sat back down at the table, determined to finish what might be his last meal.



FELIX MOVED through the corridors once more, sword in one hand, glittering dagger in the other. He had sat in the kitchen as long as he dared while fear made a home in his gut. Eventually it seemed like a better idea to go and meet his doom head on than to sit there like a frightened rabbit.

He entered a great hall. The ceiling was high. Banners with the crest of Count Hrothgar hung from the ceilings. The heads of many animals, taken as hunting trophies, covered the walls.

Two figures were present. One was the sorcerer, Voorman. The other was the man-wolf. It was monstrous, half again as tall as Felix, its chest rounder than a barrel. Great claws flexed at the end of its long arms. Undying hatred glittered in its red wolf eyes.

'You came, as I knew you would,' the sorcerer said.

At first Felix wondered how the sorcerer had known he was there but then he realised that Voorman was talking to the creature.

'And now you will die.' Lips never meant for human speech mangled the words. The sorcerer stepped back. His cloak billowed and light flared around his staff.

The wolf stood frozen to the spot for a moment then reached out and tore Voorman's head off with one massive claw. The sorcerer's body stumbled forward. Blood gouted from his severed neck and sprayed the Beast.

From outside came the sound of wolves howling, and combat. Doubtless the last survivors were being mown down Felix thought. He eyed the beast warily.

The sorcerer's blood steamed. A cloud of vapour rose over his corpse, taking on the outline of the mage. It stretched its arms triumphantly and flowed towards the Child of Ulric. The mist entered the creature's mouth and nostrils and it stood there for a moment, clutching its throat and seemingly unable to breath. The light vanished from its eyes and then a hellish green glow flickered there. When the creature spoke again, its voice was Voorman's.

'At last,' it said. 'The spell of Transmutation is a success. Immortality and power are mine. The beast's strength is mine. I will live until Lord Tzeentch comes to claim this world. All things are indeed mutable.'

Felix stood aghast. A horrified understanding of what he had witnessed filled his brain. Voorman's plan had come to fruition. The trap was sprung. The corrupt soul of the wizard had taken possession of the man-wolf's body. His malign intelligence and sorcerous power would live on in its monstrous shape. Voorman now possessed the strength and invulnerability of the Children of Ulric as well as his own evil powers.

Slowly the terrible green gaze came to rest on Felix. He felt the strength leech of him under that baleful glare. Outside he heard the wolves whimper in fear and the bellow of a war cry that sounded strangely familiar.

The man-wolf gestured and, hypnotised, Felix moved closer till he was within striking distance of its massive blood-spattered claws. Voorman reached out, his immense talons closing...

Throwing off his fear, Felix ducked and lashed out with his sword. He might as well have struck a stone statue. The keen edge of the blade bounced. The man-wolf's return slash tore Felix's jerkin. Pain seared his side where the razor edged claws bit deep. Felix sprang back. Only the fact that his reflexes were on a knife edge had saved him from being gutted.

Things seemed to happen in slow motion. The man-wolf wheeled to face him. Felix circled. The beast sprang. Its rush was as irresistible as a thunderbolt. It bowled Felix over, its enormous arms encircling him in a hug that threatened to snap his ribs like twigs. Frantically Felix stabbed downwards with the dagger in his left hand. To his surprise it pierced fur. There was a smell like rotting meat and the man-wolf threw back its head and howled.

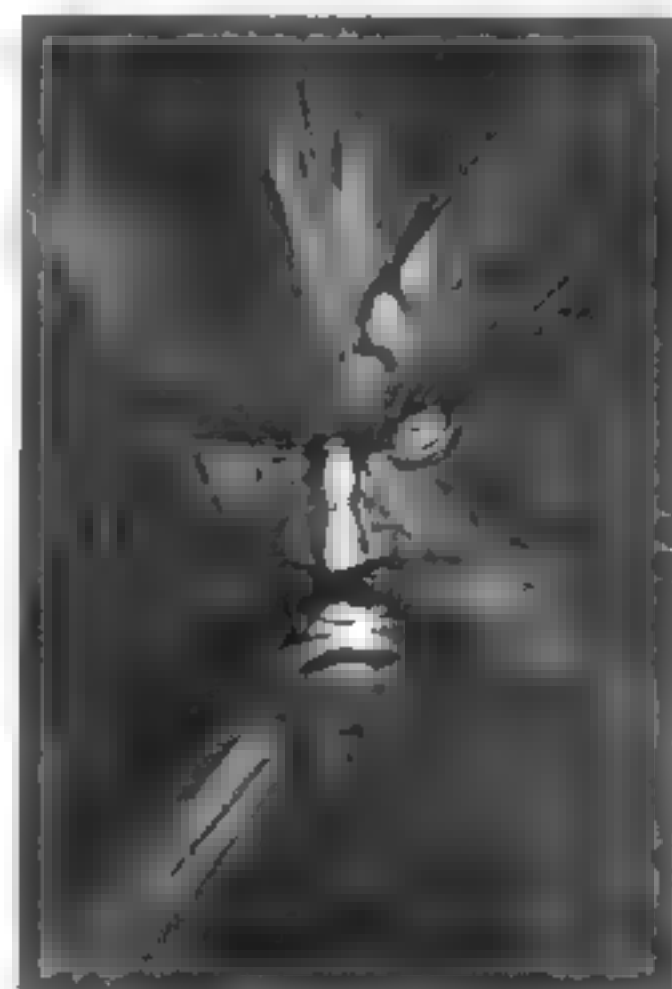
Felix kept stabbing. Where he stabbed the flesh became soft. The wolf's grip now was weak. Felix pulled himself clear and kept stabbing. Pockets of blackness appeared in the man-wolf's fur like spots of rot in overripe fruit. He kept stabbing. The man-wolf fell and the rot spread across its body, consuming it completely. The mighty form withered, overcome by the baneful runes on the dagger.

Then the hellish glow left the weapon. It felt inert in Felix's grasp. He opened numb fingers and let it fall to the floor.

It was a long time before he pulled himself to his feet to look around the hall. The girl stood in the doorway. Gotrek stood behind her like an executioner. The blade of the massive axe lay against her neck like a promise.

'Thought I'd never get to the end of those damn tracks. Had to kill about fifty wolves to get in too,' the Slayer said, inspecting the scene of carnage with a professional air.

'Well, manling, it looks like you've had a busy night. I hope you've left me something to kill.' ●



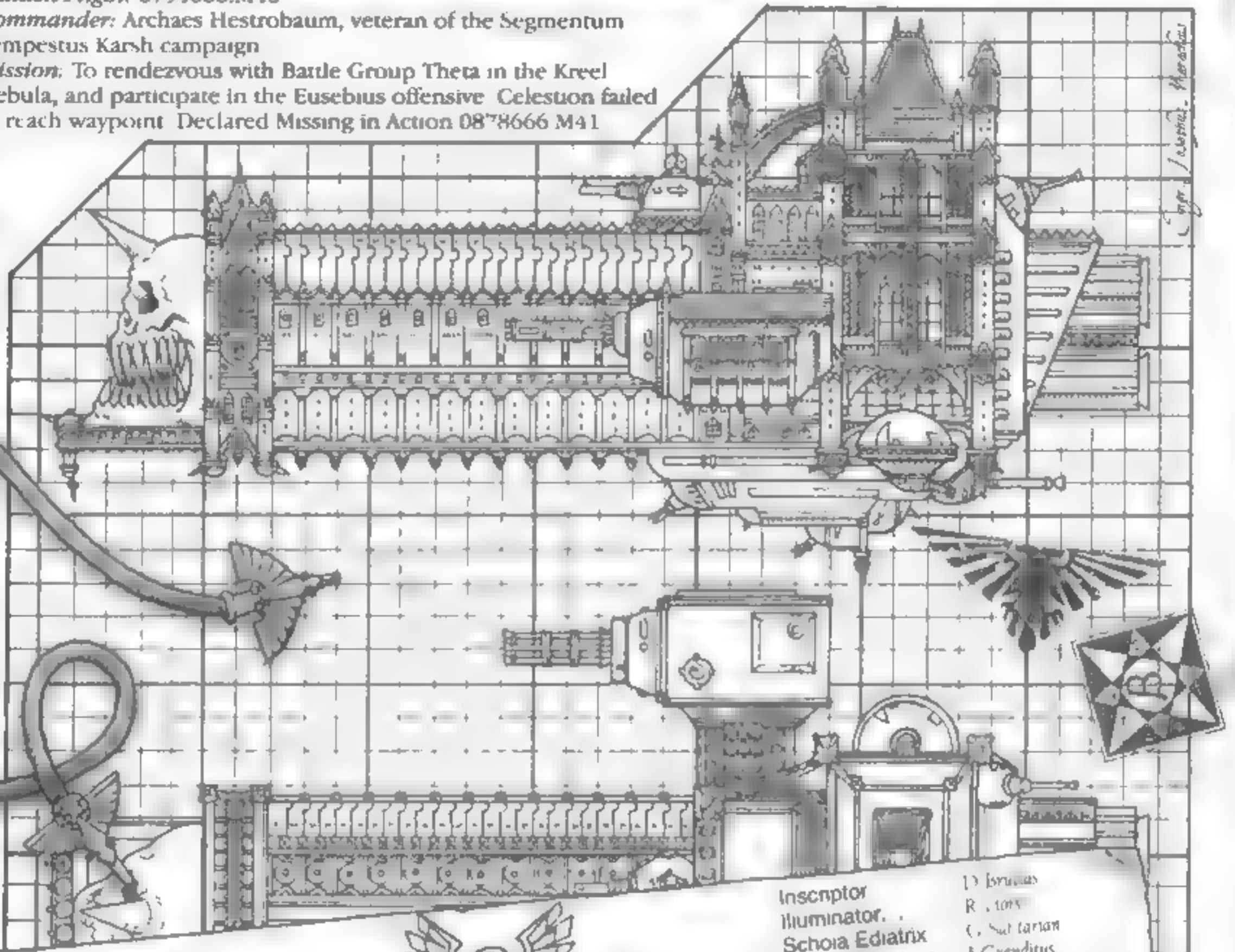


The Celestion Construction Plans. Brief History.



Inscriptor	K. Luvius
Illuminator	R. Horst
Schola Ediatrix	I. Prado
Edo Purificatum	G. Granditus
Edo Diabolus	O. Caeson
Tabula Librarum	TA 3657.96-85\vr8

Maiden Flight: 0754666.M40
Commander: Archaes Hestrobaum, veteran of the Segmentum Tempestus Karsh campaign
Mission: To rendezvous with Battle Group Theta in the Kreef Nebula, and participate in the Eusebius offensive. Celestion failed to reach waypoint. Declared Missing in Action 0878666.M41



Celestion Navigator. Kenelm Pollox. Transfer request.



Inscriptor	D. Brutus
Illuminator	R. Luvius
Schola Ediatrix	G. Sultarian
Edo Purificatum	J. Granditus
Edo Diabolus	O. Caeson
Tabula Librarum	TA 3689.96-06\vs

Kenelm Pollox had many times proved his loyalty to the Emperor through the diligence of his service. He had received an especial mention for his participation in the Karsh campaign, where he had served alongside Archaes Hestrobaum on the Silver Grail. His intuitive navigational ability enabled the Ork warlord Grist Blood-Moon's battlefleet to become outflanked, resulting in many enemy ships being destroyed, amongst them the powerful Bosmork.

Kenelm Pollox was very forthright in expressing his desire not to serve upon the Celestion. He requested a transfer to a different ship. The request was correctly refused, and the requisite notation made against his record.

The reasons cited for his request appeared insubstantial and improper, including:
 'A deep foreboding casts shadows over my soul.'
 'I sense that warp space will claim us. Doom clings to the Celestion's hull.'

His furlough leave was cancelled, and he was confined to his quarters before the Celestion's departure.



Celestion: First Sighting.
Jank Overmeir.
Ceaseless crewman.



Inscriptor.....L. Juventian
IlluminatorD. Fallion
Schola Ediatrrix.....P. Torst
Edo PurificatumJ. Granditus
Edo DiabolusS. Aesch
Tabula LibrarumTA 267880-35.p0



J. Overmeir.
Ceaseless
2341-0256. d562



The Imperium exploratory vessel Ceaseless, under the command of Captain Sven Huntersun, was on a routine mission to explore and colonise Epsilon-13.

The log records that they responded to a distress signal in warp space on 2341679.M41. The signal was identified as emanating from the Celestion.

Jank Overmeir was a crewman aboard the Ceaseless, and the following personal diary extract illuminates their encounter with the Celestion:

'Sure hoped for the Emperor's guidance sitting in that shuttle crossing the vastness of the w towards the bulk of the Celestion. Had seemed like a normal response to a distress signal, but communication had been successful in reaching the stranded vessel. Typically I was one of the unfortunates chosen to "board and explore". Wasn't too nervous until Magyar says that this was the ship that'd disappeared over a decade ago. That's when my praying began!

'Powering towards the stern airlock all eyes were anxiously locked on the Celestion's fearsome cannon turrets. One glancing swipe from those beasts and we'd have been history. The whole ship was lit up like it was on some grand victory parade, yet it was all quiet. Yea, ghostly. Even docking had to be done using manual controls.

'Walking down those echoing corridors was like entering a crypt. Magyar voiced some oaths as we surveyed the polished, parade ground perfection around us. Everything was as it must have been the day she was launched – but nobody was there. Not even the remains of anybody.

'It were as if they'd seen us coming and just... just disappeared! In the galley pots simmered, drinks steamed in cups, half-eaten meals lay abandoned. The Commander's Log broke off mid-sentence. The date read 1770666.M41.

'Maybe the Emperor knows what happened on that ill-fated day to the thousands of poor souls onboard, but sure as all heretics will die in torment I don't. There weren't much we could do. The entire crew of the Ceaseless wouldn't have been half enough to man even the bare essentials on that brute. Huntersun ordered a marker buoy to be placed onboard, and we that doomed vessel good riddance.

... 12 will faze me after our trip round that ghost-

Ceaseless Affair.
Epsilon-13 fatalities.

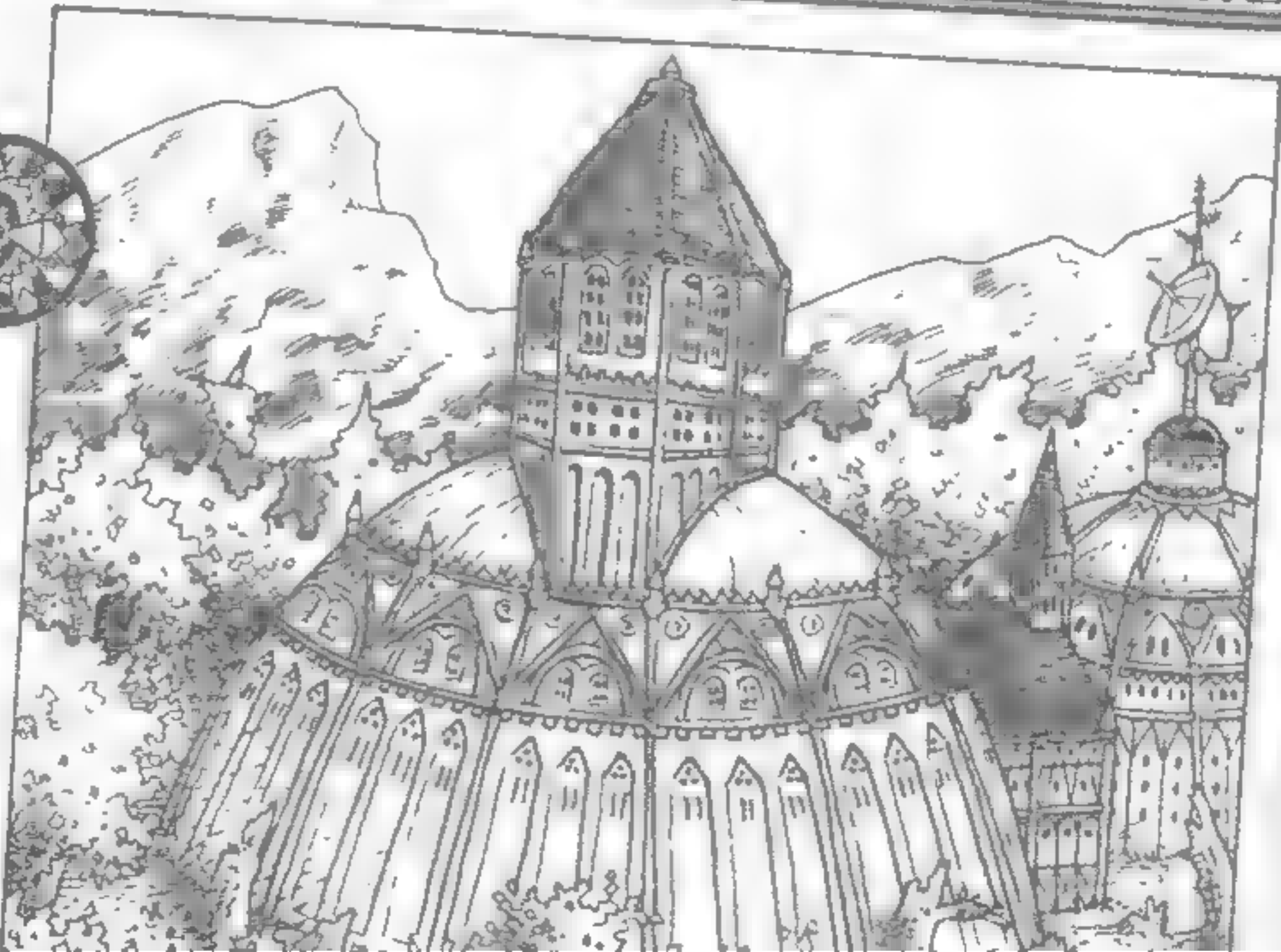


Inscriptor.....A. Hallude
IlluminatorD. Fallion
Schola Ediatrrix ... P. Torst
Edo Purificatum .. J. Kail
Edo DiabolusS. Aesch
Tabula Librarum .. TA 2980.32-16/p9

Huntersun's exploration team initially reported a blessed planet ripe for colonisation and established their base dom without difficulty.

Within two weeks a foul contamination had struck their ranks. Sickness and death quickly became endemic. A distress signal was issued, but by the time a relief mission reached the distant planet there were no survivors.

Epsilon-13 was promptly designated a Deathworld, and thus a prohibited area to all Imperial personnel.



Garandus Affair

Celestion, second sightings.
Golden Halo Chapter.



Inscriptor.....D. Brutus
Illuminator.....O. Essau
Schola Ediatrix.....T. Jurgens
Edo Purificatum.....I. Ha!
Edo Diabolus.....S. Aesch
Tabula Librarum.....TA 4765-21-35\16

The marker buoy left by the Ceaseless emitted its signal for less than a day. The next sighting was not until 3220732 M41, when the battlecruiser Garandus dramatically encountered the Celestion.

This excerpt from Captain Luft Falchion's command log provides the details.

3219732 M41

Navigator Horrent reports his signals indicate a clear course. All systems fully functional.

3220732 M41

A vessel appeared out of nowhere on our direct course. Point of origin remains unknown, but ship positively identified as the Celestion.

We were heading for a direct impact. Praise the Emperor, Helmsman Corbell acted very promptly by engaging reverse thrust on all the engines, combined with a hard starboard movement. Sadly the hasty work of the Tech-Priests and crewmen could not avoid a severe glancing collision.

Impact damage was sustained upon the lower port bow, sweeping along the length of the ship to turret P15. Several of the hangars containing the Golden Halo Space Marine chapter's dropships were ripped apart. The force of the void sucked many of these vessels out into the Warp.

The Garandus's Adeptus Mechanicus began their rituals to repair our stricken vessel, but an initial survey showed the engines operating well under full power.

As the retrieval of the unmanned dropships was underway, Navigator Horrent's cries alerted us to a flux located in warp space on our original course.

Navigator Horrent deemed it essential to evacuate the area. When the gravitational pull of the forming vortex became greater than the reduced power of our engines, nothing would prevent the Garandus being sucked inexorably to its doom. Our escape could only be made by immediate action.

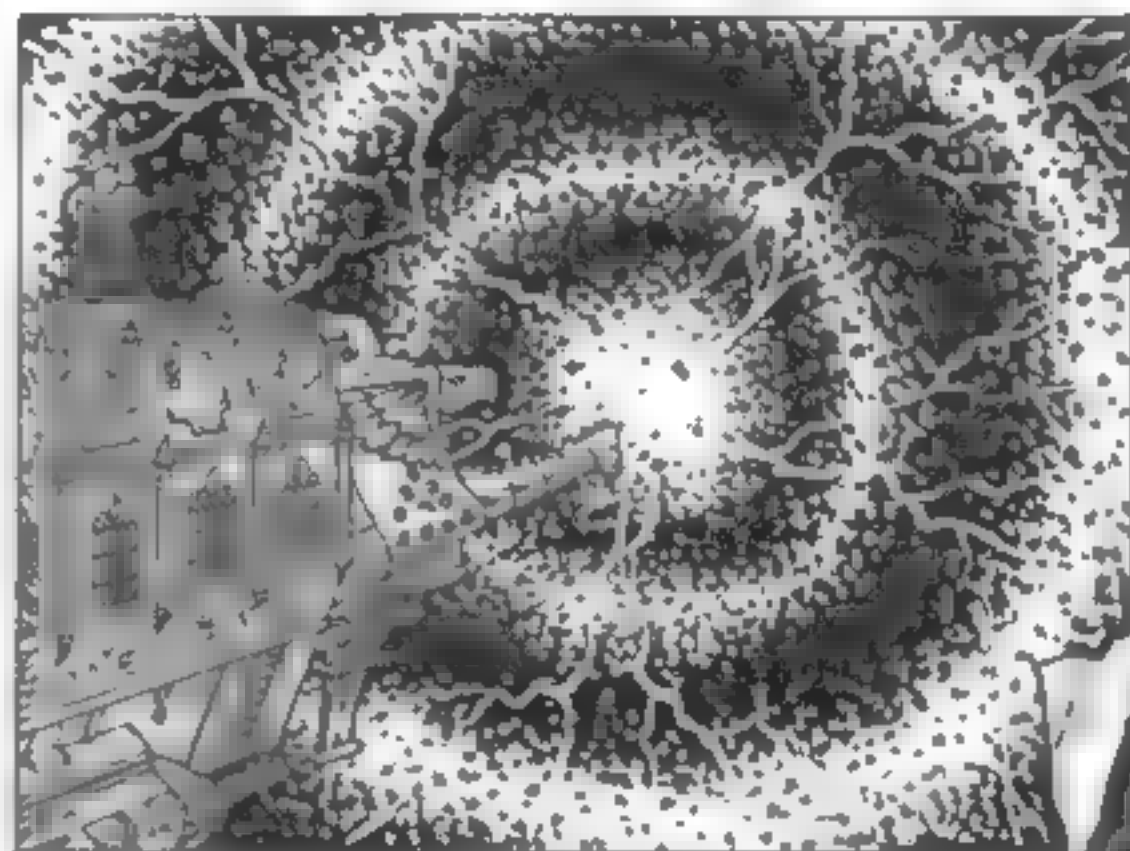
Regrettably, the urgency required forced us to abandon all other operations. This resulted in the loss of the remaining dropships and recovery tugs.

Garandus Incident: Assessment

It was only because of this accident that a greater disaster was avoided.

If the Garandus had not been forced to alter course and reverse engines as a result of the Celestion's appearance, it appears fatal contact with the rapidly appearing vortex would have been unavoidable.

Nevertheless the mission had to be terminated. Casualties were listed as 2362, 17% from the Golden Halo Space Marine chapter. May their souls find rest in His sight.



Vortices are one of the most unpredictable hazards of travel in the warp. They can take an aeon to evolve, or just as possible appear instantly.

The Golden Halos banner has flown above many a battlefield. Most notably it witnessed the Chapter's victories at Kistvaen, Podzol and the decade-long Siege of Nectocalyx, which was more commonly known as 'The Meatgrinder.'

Their motto *Ex Ungue Leonem* ('Judge the Lion by his claws') reveals their proud martial tradition.



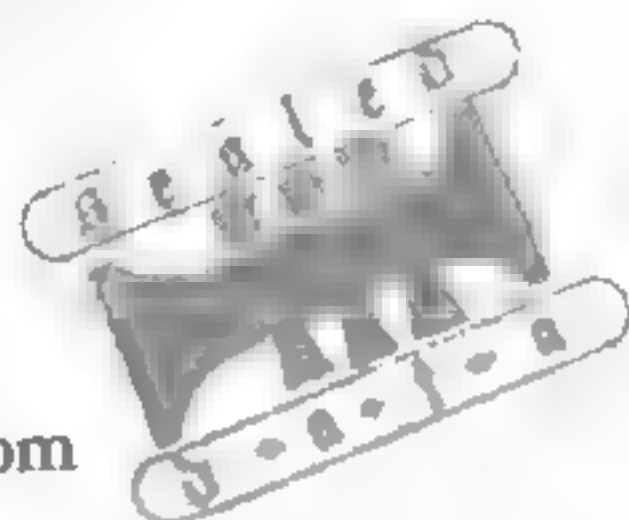
Section: Visions



InscriptorA Weiner
Illuminator.....N Maurgen
Schola Ediatix.....U Allnach
Edo Purificatum.....F Oduloz
Edo Diabolus.....H Ergen
Tabula Librarum.....TA 4765.21-36.16

ts.
diary sightings.

creasing association between the
ance of the Celestion and disaster has
much fear amongst many of the
cor's subjects travelling into the reaches
p space. This has led to the doomed
acquiring many epithets. Those in most
on usage are as follows:



- The Cursed Celestion
- The Ghost Ship
- The Death Knell
- The Angel of Death
- The Harbinger of Doom

use of such terminology should be
ously opposed. All officers are beholden
e Emperor to maintain good order and
pline. These phrases lead to
oralisation through unhealthy thoughts. All
epithets should be prohibited, and lead to
found to be in usage.

One of the most curious features is the vessel's
impact on weaker minds. The apparently
premonitory aspect of the Celestion seems
to induce temporary mental failure. This has
led to hallucinations in which the victims claim
to have seen a 'ghostly vision' hovering over
the Celestion. The recorded personal impres-
sions are curious in their similarity: a cowed
male figure, often clutching a weighty tome. All
speak of its piercing eyes. These visions have
never been recorded with any device.

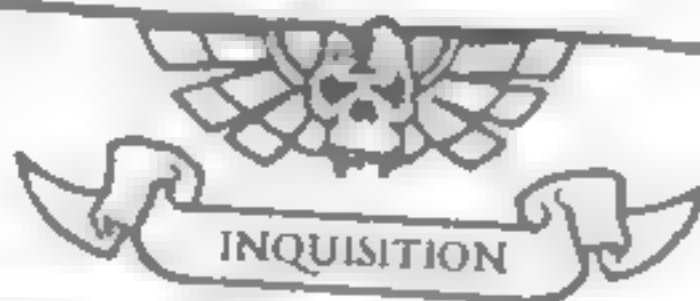
After the first appearance of the Celestion,
further sightings have proven irregular and
unpredictable. Puzzlingly some merely h
apart, yet in separate sectors of warp space.
There does appear to be a correlation between
the Celestion's appearance and the occurrence
of matters of some seriousness. Those of
especial interest are here noted:

Angelicus – Engine explosion, 1276 dead.
Garandus – Collision, 2362 dead.
Jurgenstadt – Lost in the Warp.
ambushed by Orks, destroyed.

58 dead

Pharos

Captain Shrieval.
Desertion of Duty.



.....A Weiner
.....N Maurgen
Ediatix.....U Allnach
do Purificatum.....F Oduloz
Edo Diabolus.....H Ergen
Tabula Librarum.....TA 4765.21-36.16

The Pharos is a large, deep-space transport vessel,
whose regular missions involved conveying
essential supplies between Imperial bases in the
5th Quadrant of the Segmentum Pacificus. On
one such trip, its encounter with the Celestion
foreboded a fate far worse than most have
experienced. The relevant section from Captain
Shrieval's log reveal this to a devastating effect.

1349789.M41. Mission T472-52 Commences.
Cargo loading completed at Varnash.

Mission T472-J52: Day 26.
Celestion sighted. 5th Quadrant. Joebrecht
Cluster. Crew troubled and demoralised.

Mission T472-J52: Day 26\2nd entry.
Message received from Varnash. Garbled, and
unclear, appeared to relate to an enemy attack



Mission T472~J52: Day 27
Aft hold 3c decompressed. The repair team reported damage to several containers. All appear to have been smashed from the inside. Within them strange, sticky, egg-like remains. Outer hull ripped open.
Ship put on full alert.

Cass
Uniq
Silver
Shrie

Whilst Captain Shrievell abandoned the Pharos and tons of vital equipment to its doom, Cassius Crozier refused to follow the order to abandon ship. Isolating himself on the bridge with two other loyal comrades, he sought to fight off the monstrous onslaught of their fearsome alien enemy.

Only Cassius must know what horrors were endured in the cramped confines of that bridge, but when the rescue mission arrived they found his ravaged body barely conscious. Surrounding the heroic crewman lay mangled piles of inhumanity, the shredded remnants of his two brave companions, and the detritus of an awesome fight. Laser scars marked the walls that had been ripped asunder by steely claws, and daubed in the cruel intermingling of human and alien blood. Cassius's remaining hand gripped a blunted chainsword in a remorseless grip, and he appeared about to breath his last.

Despite the severity of his injuries, including an arm wrenched apart at the elbow, and serious acid burns upon his face and torso, Cassius survived. His heroic stance saved the Pharos from destruction by a truly accursed enemy. He received the unique privilege of being awarded the Silver Star, a very rare award to one of such lowly rank. His testimony of the attack revealed Shrievell's true nature. For far from presenting a stalwart defence, the evacuation had begun upon first sighting of their horrifying opponents.

Cassius Crozier ended his glorious career as master of the transporter Galadius, which, under his command, participated in the dramatic relief of Fedarie.

Captain Shrievell's disgraceful abandonment of his ship led to dishonour, demotion and execution.

Thought for the Day:
To retire in disgust is not
the same as apathy.



Classified



INQUISITION DIKTAT: R0167-5\254a01
Date: 0276864 M41

The vessel known as the Celestion is a vile corruption of its Imperial origins. Its continuing existence is extremely dangerous.

All attempts should be made to destroy it on sight.

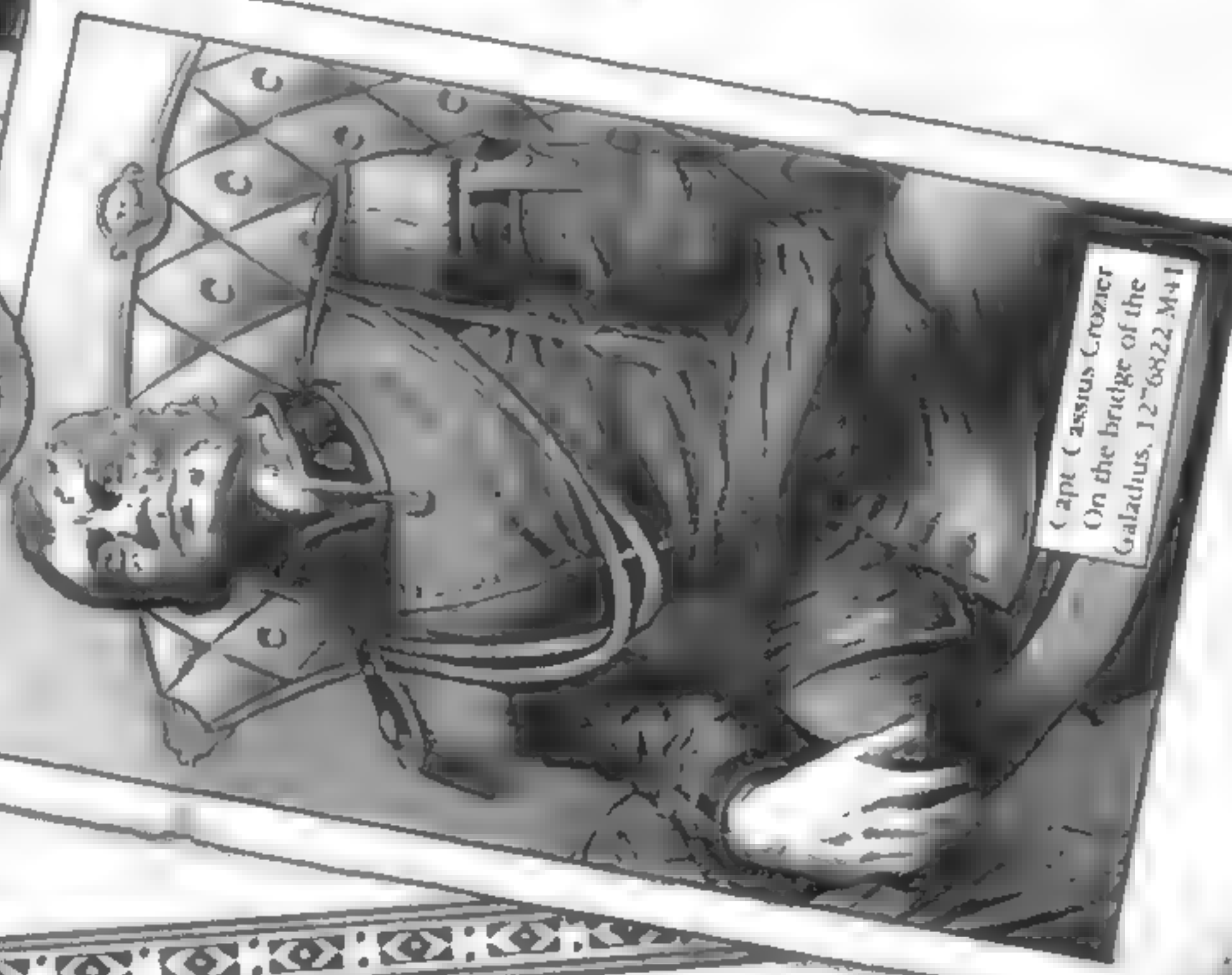
It is the duty of all Imperial subjects to rid the Imperium of this foul canker.

All boarding actions are forthwith authorized.

THOUGHT HE IS WATCHING

Inscriptor.....
Illuminator.....
Schola Ediatrix.....
Edo Punicatum.....
Edo Diabolus.....
Tabula Librarum

Capt Cassius Crozier
On the bridge of the
Galadius, 12~6822 M41



The first 'skeleton crew' to be put aboard the Celestion was in 1890832.M41 It was led by Tech-Priest Eleazer Nascitur of the scout ship Righteous Seeker.

All previous marker buoys had ceased signalling shortly after being placed onboard, and it would have pleased the Emperor greatly to retrieve the Celestion.

Eleazer led long hours of ritual which filled the corridors with the pungent smells of incense and oils. Startlingly, these served to reveal that the Celestion was totally undamaged. A powerful thrumming drone cut through the invocations as the engines spun into life.

Eye-witness accounts describe how the Celestion began a slow stately progress, but upon gaining speed the space around it was seen to:

'Bubble and froth like a foaming hot spring. The black void seemed to lap over it in turbulent waves. The Celestion appeared to submerge, bob up and then disappear completely.'

The crew were lost, and nor were they ever seen in any future sighting.

Others suffered a similar fate, and as a result an Inquisition diktat was issued on the matter.

Celestion: Destruction

Righteousness

Baedlam



Inscriptor F Yossarian
 Illuminator F Vale
 Schola Ediatix . . . U. Allach
 Edo Purificatum . . H. Shostak
 Edo Diabolus L. Carcharus
 Tabula Librarum . . FL 8120 37 89 v4

The first opportunity to destroy the Celestion did not occur until nearly a decade had elapsed since the Imperial Diktat was issued. In 1005873.M41 Captain Hals Hygristor, commanding the Righteousness, encountered the mysterious vessel.

He ordered an immediate attack. In turrets throughout his craft, gunners began sustained firing, during which over five thousand plasma rounds were discharged. Despite this vast assault, the Celestion appeared to suffer no visible damage. Considering further expenditure of ammunition to be wasteful as well as futile, he called the attack off.

Tragically, the Righteousness's mission was similarly a failure. Engaged in the blockade of the Chaos homeworld Baedlam the vessel was engaged by the enemies' Retaliator. Under sustained fire, one of the heavy plasma cannon quickly overheated and exploded. This triggered a chain-reaction in several magazines, leaving the Righteousness crippled.

Captain Hygristor was forced to scuttle his ship as it was being boarded by hordes of Deathguard Chaos Space Marines. He was posthumously awarded the Iron Star.



The fate of the Righteousness did little to inspire further assaults upon the Celestion.

IN HOC SIGNO VINCES • IN THIS SIGN THOU WILT CONQUER

INQUISITORIAL WARRANT

His Imperial Majesty requests and requires all those presented with this warrant to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance.

The bearer is entrusted with the full authority of the Inquisition, and will be afforded such assistance and protection as may be requested.

All enquiries shall be answered unhesitatingly and without speculation upon the reasons for such investigation.

May the Emperor's will be done.

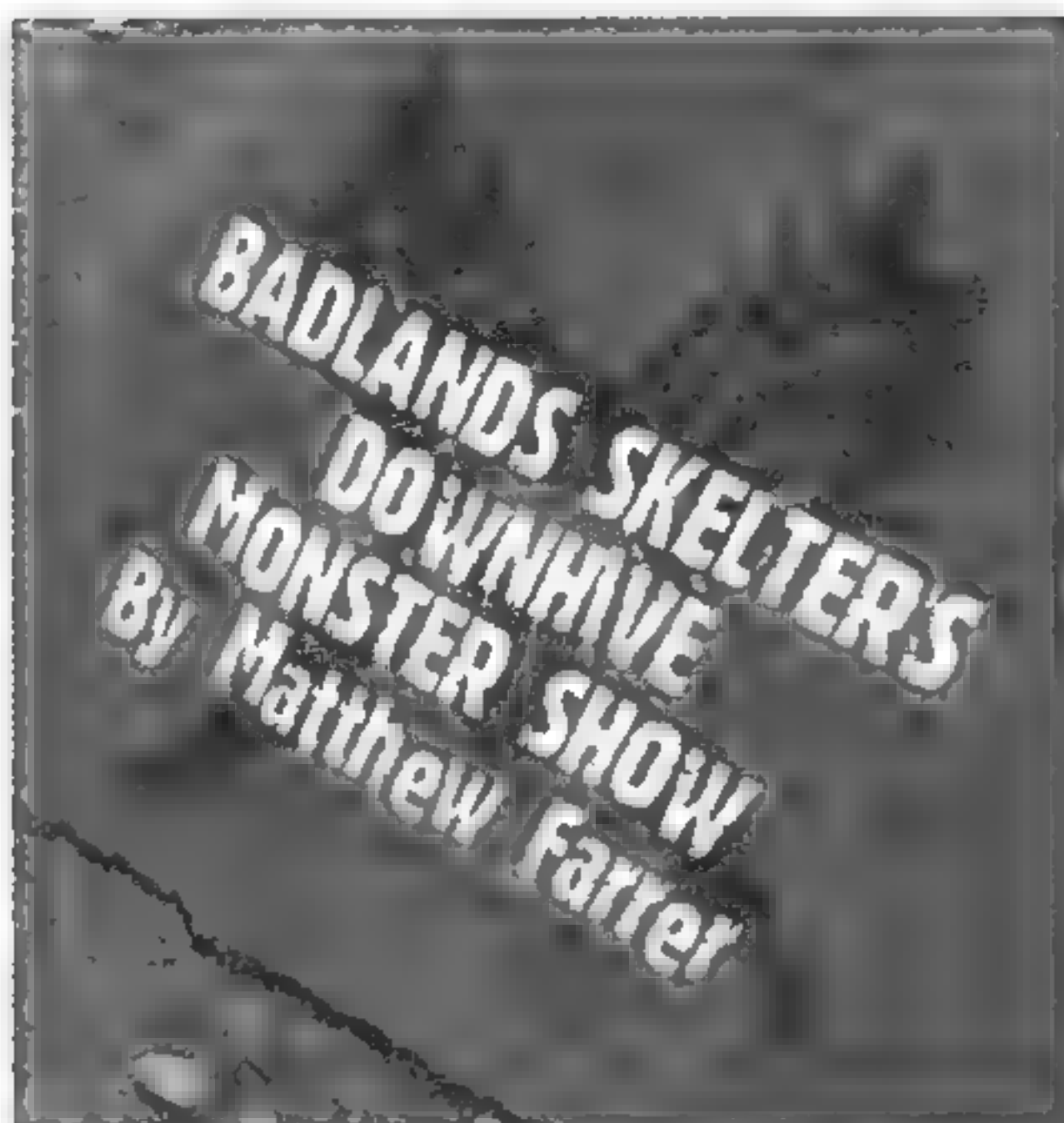


vigilate et orare • watch and pray

SIGNO VINCES

Inscriptor & Illuminator: Ralph Horsley





THE CENTRAL thoroughfare of Fever's Break started at the fortified gates and snaked under the huge ridge of metal where the dome floor had buckled during some upheaval hundreds of years before. Where it reached the moving stairs into the cliff-face that formed the uptown, it opened out into a plaza against the dome wall. That was where all the local hawkers, preachers, beggars and hoods spent their days, and that was where Skelter stopped and had his people set up the tent.

Starkey had unhitched the two biggest pack-bison from the main wagon and was using them to pull the poles upright, while his brother and daughter ran back and forth with magnetic clamps for the guy-ropes. Skelter's own kids were already at work, running back and forth through the streets nearby trying to look like locals and shouting 'Skelter's show is here! Skelter's show is here!' to each other. They were good at it. By the time tickets went on sale, everyone would know about them.

Another half-dozen of the troupe were strolling back and forth around the tent and the rows of wagons and trailers parked in a jumble beyond it, relaxed but watchful eyes on the crowd that was already building up. Skelter glanced out at the faces and did some quick mental arithmetic, and liked the result. In a few minutes he would begin his pitch.

Amongst the cages bustled the rest of them, making sure the covers were closed and the more excitable exhibits were staying calm. Kamusz, the retired Bounty Hunter, winked at Skelter as he let a fold of tarpaulin fall away as if by accident. Instantly a huge scaly arm shot out and grabbed at him, got him by the front of his jerkin and yanked him toward the bars. There were screams from the crowd. Kamusz yelled as if in fear and Skelter got in on the act, running across and whacking at the arm with a pistol barrel. It retreated and as they put back the tarp Skelter saw Issig the Scaly snort through his nostrils in salute before he curled back up to snooze again. They sauntered away.

'That should sell us another couple of dozen tickets,' Skelter murmured.

Kamusz nodded. 'Are you putting Issig in tonight?'

'Sure.' There was a flapping behind them as the banner went up: 'badlands skelter's downhive monster show!'. They kept walking. 'I don't think the line-up we tried at Rathouse Gulch worked too well. I'm going to bring Issig on last. Most people up here by the Wall are so green they barely know what a Scaly is. Remember how they screamed the first time we brought him out at Winchcrag? I'll put on the Sump Toads early, maybe even have someone walk one around on a leash this afternoon to raise interest.'

Kamusz nodded, then tapped Skelter's arm as a wave of shuffles and muttering rippled through the onlookers. 'Trouble.'

Silent figures were making their way through the crowd, silent figures dressed in heavy cloaks and hats that made them look a head taller than the townsfolk around them. The gawpers melted aside as the leader stalked over. The two showmen tensed. The ganger was easily Skelter's height, which was unusual enough, but his heavy frame loomed where Skelter's long limbs just gangled. Kamusz began idly whistling the little tune that the troupe used as a signal for everyone to get armed and ready. There was a rattle behind them as the doors on the cages were loosened.

'Where is the Wyrd here?'

Skelter gave Kamusz a quick 'I knew it!' look, then brightened up and tried to look attentive.

'No Wyrds here, sir, I assure you. We have Guilder stamps of passage, everyone's been cleared by the Adeptus themselves. Just years of experience in the worst of the Badlands at the very Sump of the Hive, and training that brings out these creatures' natural behaviours. Brought up to these peaceful towns for the first time ever!' He raised his voice a little for the benefit of the crowd. 'For your education, edification and amazement, we give you—'

'There is *a Wyrd here!*' The leader cut him off.

Skelter suppressed a sigh and idly wondered if the man was from a gang he'd heard of. With practice, you could pick the Cawdor flunkies: lovely resonant voices. It was all those hymns and sermons. Not that it made up for the trouble they caused.

'Psykers and carousing and harbouring of mutations! This so-called "show" is a stench in the nostrils of the Emperor. The townsfolk would not listen to our warnings, but I know your kind – thieves and swindlers all.'

Another meaningful glance between Skelter and Kamusz. *Damn, usually it doesn't happen this soon.*

The ranter shoved a hand under his cloak for a weapon. Skelter let his needle pistol slide smoothly from his sleeve to his hand and fired a single, silent shot into the man's throat. The townsfolk yelped and dove for cover as two more gangers fell before they could bring weapons to bear.

Then the cages swung open and Tara ran past, blowing a whistle. Six huge Sump Toads recognised the signal and bounded out of their cages, chasing the last few gangers away down the street, as four of the troupe's wranglers grabbed nets and leashes and took off after them. The crowd parted before them, and Skelter was gratified to hear catcalls and clapping as the gangers scuttled away.

The prone leader was beginning to stir and groan, so Kamusz kicked him hard in

the temple. He slumped again as Skelter fitted the little pistol back into its slip-sheath.

'How long have we been working the big-towns circuit, Kam? I can never get over the so-called "settled levels". Call themselves gangers? Soft as spider-gut. I mean, the banner and all our posters say I lived at Hive bottom for years. Why doesn't anybody ever act as though they believe me?' Kamusz was bent over the unconscious gangers. 'C'mon, best not to rob them. You know there'll be the Watch along in a second. Let them be the bad guys, hey?'

'I'm not robbing them, Skelter. Recognise these? The way the chamber and sight are set on the stub-gun here, the barrel configuration. And look, that knife, chisel-point and no quillions. Only one House makes that design. Give you odds he's got a mask collection at home.'

'Great. Just great. Back at the Gulch they told us this was a nice, fat, quiet town.'

'Probably is, most of the time. This whole level is only just within the Underhive by most people's reckoning. The upramps to Hive City proper are only a morning's ride away. Things up here get run pretty tightly. I had people ask around. There are two deputised Watch gangs, the Fireclouds and the Gunsmoke Shadows, and they're both Escher-affiliated. Cawdor loyalties in a town like this mean you have meetings in a cellar and keep your mask under your mattress. We must be something special to bring them out of their burrows.' Kamusz looked around. 'Skel, your crowd's getting pensive.'

The showman nodded, then wheeled around and raised his arms.

'That was no *excitement*, ladies and gentlemen! That was a scuffle any Downhive *child* could have won! I hope you think you were entertained before, folk of Fever's Break, because *tonight* I'll prove that wrong, wrong, *wrong!* Tonight, at 'Badlands Skelter's Downhive Monster Show!'

Behind him there was a rattle as the shutter went up in a wagon's side and the ticket window opened. Most of the crowd

jostled for spots in the queue, and Skelter straightened his waistcoat, twirled his moustache and beamed at everyone.



THERE WAS a grey adamant slab set at eye-level in the far wall of the anteroom, with two lines carved in plain, blunt letters: we determine the guilty. we decide the punishment. Skelter read them for the eighth time, scowled and shuffled his feet. Next to him, Tara gave an ostentatious yawn.

'It was those tickets we sold, wasn't it?' murmured Kamusz from Skelter's other side, and that was too much.

Skelter flapped his arms about. 'Refunds! There are no more hateful two syllables under the Emperor's sun. We had to give *refunds!*'

'Really? No syllables more hateful?' Kamusz scratched his thin white beard as he thought. Tara rocked on her heels, slender hands twitching. They had been disarmed when they were brought into the bunker, and she was missing having a weapon to hold.

'I mean, coming and griping about the show, that was fine. Wasn't that fine? That was OK! I welcome that! I welcome everybody to come and have their say, no one can say I'm unreasonable about that.'

'How about "Scavvy"?' Kamusz said while Skelter drew breath. 'That's pretty hateful.'

'I would have been happy to discuss the whole thing with them. Open a bottle or two, sit around a table, discuss any problem they had at all. But nooo...'

"Cawdor", of course,' Tara put in. 'Two syllables and as hateful as you want.'

'Out they come and they get the bloody Arbites on us! Not the Watch, you'll notice, not the duly deputised Guilders representatives delegated to keep the peace and protect the interests of the community. Oh, no, that's too simple.'

"Lashworm"?' Kamusz suggested. Tara shook her head.

"Lashworm" is a very congenial two

syllables.' She ducked a particularly vehement gesture of Skelter's. 'You can train lashworms, you know. Mother's family taught me. You can teach them to pop out for certain types of sounds or smells. Tricky, though.'

'Really? How about – no, that's not two syllables. How about "No sales"?'

'Even Arbites would be acceptable!' Skelter pointedly raised his voice a notch to try to ride over them. 'I mean, Arbites, OK, we've dealt with them before. I mean, they say they serve the Emperor Himself, even Helmawr can't gainsay them. Oaths of loyalty, upright and true, all the rest of it. Fine! But they waited...'

'Ooh. "No sales." Ooh.' Tara rolled the words around a little. 'Yes, that's hateful.'

'I said they waited until we were almost sold out and then brought every damn thing down! I don't think you two have grasped this yet. Me! Skelter! A showing of the Downhive Monster Show cancelled! We have had. To give. Refunds!'

Skelter could see from Tara's face that she was framing a tart reply when the far door clanged open and the Arbites marched in. Hustling after them came the Cawdor leader Skelter had shot, in full regalia now: dark tunic, oiled-leather mask, a stickpatch over the cut the needle had left in his neck. He was fidgeting with triumph or agitation – Skelter couldn't tell through the mask and shapeless clothes. The senior of the two Judges, in black and grey tunic in place of armour, walked to a heavy chair that rose silently through a floor-panel and settled into it in a swirl of his black cloak. His deputy watched impassively through a gleaming, mirror-tinted visor.

'Which of you is Skelter? Stand forward, please.' Skelter took a slow half-step.

'You have had something of a... fraught introduction to this precinct, Skelter. This district is a quiet one. Laws are obeyed. You, however, seem to have aroused some passions.' He flicked the showman an appraising look over steepled fingertips and suddenly pointed to the Cawdor.

'Citizen Jago, of the, um...'

'Light of Fury!' boomed the mask.

'Light of Fury brethren has a number of claims against your, what is it, "Downhive Monster Show"? He has declared it will encourage lawlessness and riot. I understand there was a scuffle when you set your exhibits up earlier. One that it was necessary to bring before the Adeptus.' The Judge's tone was ironic, but Jago had apparently missed that: he nodded in evident satisfaction and folded his arms.

'I can't understand that, sir. No alcohol is to be sold, certainly not drugs, not even food. There are some dangerous creatures, true, Milliasaurs and Ripper-jacks and so on, but we keep those in secure cages and simply charge people to look. I realise that these are settled parts, sir, and people aren't at ease about untamed hive life. That's why we also have acrobats, trick-shooting, more. We will be bringing out creatures from the lower Underhive, but I can vouch, sir, that through tireless training and tight technique that has tamed and...'

He realised he was pitching again, and cut himself short. 'We've been in this business for years, sir. We like order at our shows. If we start trouble, we don't get to come back. Our self-interest is your best evidence, sir.'

'Lies and ever perverse lies,' the voice snarled from under the leather mask, 'told to one who labours in utmost dignity in the service of the Emperor himself!' Jago made an elaborate holy sign at the word Emperor which Skelter didn't recognise.

'The Imperial seal is upon your shoulder, and yet this man profanes it! I came to you, Lord Justice, because surely you must see that the vicious poison of tolerance and loose thought that permits this parade of filth will rot away this town! Mutants and savages lurk in their camp, even show themselves here in a house of the blessed Adeptus! Every hour that the simple people around us are drawn away from prayer, fasting and persecution is an hour that they lose from the path of their Redemption. Consorting with mutants, tricksters and wallowers in pleasure, and those who bring the curse of the witch into the midst of the faithful!'

Skelter shifted uncomfortably. *Good grief! I'm standing in a room with a man who can actually use the word 'midst' in cold blood.*

The Judge nodded, and his gaze pivoted back to the showman.

'And there, Skelter, you have another answer to give. I have ample testimony on the creatures you have in your menagerie, and how co-operative they are. Now there are certain types of outcast with unnatural... affinities with Underhive animals. Outcasts whose names I will not speak here, but against whom I have fought in the Emperor's name. An honest showman such as yourself would have no truck with such, I trust? That is not a common-law crime, Skelter; it is most surely a spiritual one. You must know the penalties decreed for it.'

In answer, Skelter slipped a set of scroll tubes out of his carry-harness and held them out. Jago started to give little twitches of his head as he looked from Skelter to the Judge, trying to work out what was going on, and Skelter allowed himself a little smile. He stood a little further upright as the parchment was unrolled.

'Mutants!' declared Jago, who seemed to realise he'd lost the spotlight. 'Mutants and witchcraft. My brethren and I will soon have the truth. Hand them over to me, Lord Justice.' There was a rustle from the desk as the Judge rolled the papers up again.

'Thank you, Skelter, for you bringing these. I understand you have had to do this before?' The Judge's manner had palpably relaxed, and Skelter allowed himself to smile.

'Yes, sir. We usually keep them handy whenever we come into a new town. I mean, it's an understandable conclusion.'

'Are you serious, man, uh, my Lord Justice?' Jago pressed. 'With respect, lord, we cannot let the people see that these, these "entertainers" are tolerated just for having some kind of shady paperwork...' Jago's voice tailed off as he saw the Judge's face. Skelter took a discreet step back.

'What I have just seen, Mister Jago, is a certificate from a Primaris Psyker' – Jago

gasped at the word – ‘with one of our garrisons in Hive City. Its endorsement is less than a month old. It testifies that all the members of this troupe have been examined by an Adeptus Psyker, mark you, and there is no trace of any psychic spoor that signifies association with a Wyrd. There is an inspection chit from a Guilder technician stating that all the animal cages and pens are sound and well-built. And I have also just seen a permit to perform, on condition that that psychic examination is conducted every six months to make sure no Wyrds are recruited. That permit carries an Arbites counter-seal.’ He held out the tubes, and Skelter hurried forward to take them. ‘Mister Jago, downhive I suspect knowing when to quit would be a liability. Up here, it’s an asset. Think on that.’

For a long moment Jago quivered in frustration, and Skelter wondered whether to feel sorry for him. Then the man began to speak.

‘Though here today a court of my fellow mortals, even under the name and oath of the Great Emperor himself, has deemed my words and my cause unworthy, I shall speak one last time. For though my voice may be as a whisper of breeze in some long-dark corner of this land, one day, that breeze may stir a draught, and the draught may stir a current, and the current will become a great clean wind that shall rise and sweep—’

And Skelter cut him off with a delighted cry. ‘I knew that speech sounded familiar! I know that show! We toured with some actors once, it’s one of their plays! *The Triumph of Grimnar!* This cretin’s pinching his speech from a children’s fairytale!’

Jago stood frozen as a statue, one arm still flung out in front of him, while behind him there were strangled sounds as Tara tried to stay solemn. Then Skelter saw the junior Judge put a hand over his face as if to cough, and couldn’t control himself. Jago stamped out of the room and Tara and Kamusz exploded into laughter. Skelter’s eyes caught the Judge’s and he was sure he could see the faintest of glints.

‘SO?’ KAMUSZ ASKED after they had walked awhile. What do we do tomorrow?’

They had left the Arbites bunker at the top of the uptown, and were picking their way down through the sloping tunnels back to the plaza. The glow-globes were still in their day cycle up here, giving the three the novelty of light bright enough for sharp black shadows: Skelter’s tall and thin like a giant black mantis, Kamusz’s the square and jutting outline of his heavy jacket and cap, and Tara’s as small and slender as she was. The breeze from the township’s convector-fans tousled their hair.

‘We go on. I think Jago knows he’s lost the initiative tragically, now. And we should have packed out at least three shows in advance after the last couple of hours. Let’s do all the shows we can in the next few days and rake it in. Hopefully the fool won’t work up the nerve to do anything until we’re out of town. I might get you to keep—’

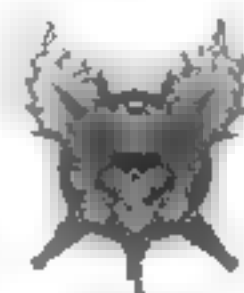
‘Extra eyes tonight, sure. What’s in the show?’

‘Most of the animals. I don’t think Tara can spare any to use as guards. And I still think we’re safe enough for a while, at least. I’d rather put everything in, have a great show, half a dozen full houses and roll out of here on a high note.’ Skelter sighed.

‘Why can’t we have more places like the Gulch? Lovely, well-policed, cushy settlements who’ll pay up for a good show. If I wanted hassle like this I’d still be down-hive wrestling plague-zombies.’

The three of them strolled on. At the plaza gates they stopped while Tara bought a cup of the salty gruel that the downtown markets sold.

A level up, a knot of dark-clad men buying clip after clip of bullets turned to watch them through the barred window of the gunsmith’s, staring after them until they disappeared into the crowds.



OH NO!' THERE WAS laughter as Tara put her hands on her hips and glared. 'Look what you've done! It's everywhere!' Behind her, Genca was soaked in a watery brown dye that looked repellent from a distance. Bolitho, wearing a too-tight coverall that made his gawky body even more comical, goggled at her. Tara, in spangled leotard and boots, turned to the audience.

'I'm so sorry, my lords and ladies. We'll carry on for you anyway.' She waited a few moments for Bolitho to start pretending to clean up what he'd spilled, and after a silent count of three blew a staccato note on her whistle and cracked the glittery display whip. The three pipe-lizards immediately jumped onto Bolitho's bent back, instead of their stools – as they'd been trained to do. More laughter. Genca clapped his hands to his head in mock dismay, paunch wobbling. At the tent entrance, Skelter shook his head and muttered aloud.

'These people are taking forever to warm up! What's wrong with them?'

'Dhunno, Bhozz.'

'Issig!' It always surprised Skelter that the alligator-snout could make words at all, let alone ones he could understand. Issig was peering past him into the tent, where Tara was pretending to scold the two men while the lizards turned somersaults behind her.

'Sss'funnhee. Thhey'rr noht lahhffhh'ng. Ss'ngthnnn whhrd.'

'Maybe they're just not into entertainment in this place. Too straight-laced and well-fed.' Even as he said it, Skelter knew how unconvincing that sounded. There was something about this crowd that made him prickly.

Bolitho and Genca walked out past him, mock-arguing, then stopped, grabbed harnesses and waited. Behind them a mohawked silhouette muttered to itself and did shoulder-stretching exercises.

'You ready, Eva?'

'Yeah.' The ex-ganger pushed her way past the two men into the strong yellow light from the tent. She flipped her pistols out of their holsters, span, juggled, tossed and caught them, and snapped them

home without taking her eyes off Issig. Eva had only joined the troupe two months before, and still hadn't come to terms with trusting a Scaly – she'd complained bitterly about using quarter-strength ammo for her act. Skelter supposed he didn't blame her.

'Cheev is controlling the targets from the box tonight, and Tara'll stay in there and do the thrown ones for you.' Eva nodded, her bright crest of hair catching the lights.

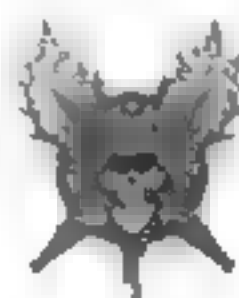
'Grim-faced crew, aren't they?' she muttered, then shuddered and touched an icon at her neck as Issig loped past her and disappeared into the gloom around the tents.

'You read my mind. But they were fighting for tickets all afternoon. Not a single empty seat.' Eva shrugged as their cue sounded, then sauntered out into the ring as the lizards trotted past her to be leashed and harnessed. Out in the ring, Tara took a large sequin from her belt and flipped it into the air, where Eva nonchalantly shot it in two to gasps and cheers.

Why are they so grim? Those lizard tricks are sure-fire. They're still not smiling, most of them. Just... attentive. There was an idea, something big and spiky that his subconscious was trying to push at him, and he found himself shifting from foot to foot and chewing his lip. Half the audience seemed to have their hands in their laps, fiddling with bundled-up clothes. That made his mind spin a little faster, and he didn't know why.

Something is so wrong here.

Just as he felt the thought begin to come, just as he was sure the piece was about to click, there was a muffled shout from back behind him. Skelter's taut nerves jerked. He crept back a few paces and listened. He thought he heard a voice, and running footsteps, and a word that sounded like 'tent!'. Then his guts lurched as he heard the thump of gunfire.



IT HADN'T BEEN a very good ambush. Kamusz had been scanning a pile of tarpaulins when he noticed a shadow that hadn't been there before. He was too old a hand to raise a shout straight away. He let them think he hadn't seen them, wandered back into the space between two trailers and ran like hell. Zian and Travis came at a quick whistled signal and they started back as a flash of light came from the perimeter. Kamusz roared and unslung his shotgun. Ten, twelve more paces and he was in cover behind a giant steel track as masked figures broke from the nearest pits and buttresses.

Damn damn damn!

Zian was squinting into a darkvisor.

'Nine, ten... no, just nine. Hey, Kamusz, this is a pretty spineless effort for a mob that knew we'd be on guard. There's gotta be more than this.'

Kamusz's mind worked faster than Skelter's had. His eyes widened.

'The tent! The tent! Back to--'

Then the darkness was alive with running, shouting figures and a shot spanged over Kamusz's head. He snarled and dropped back behind his cover as his gun came alive in his hands.

Behind them in the tent, a roar began to rise.



REALISATION SCREAMED in like a dislocated joint sliding back into place. For the first time that night, Skelter's head felt clear. He stared into the tent with his mouth open. For a moment he simply couldn't believe they would – had – tried it. But the fidgeting, the solemn faces, the watchfulness, and those little folded bundles in their laps. They were waiting for the signal. To put on their masks.

Skelter's searching eyes settled on one of the biggest men in the crowd, sitting at the most visible point, high in the central stands. Arrogant set to his wide shoulders, rich black hair, thick arms folded – and a stickpatch on the left side of his throat.

'Jago!' Skelter croaked, and then found his voice and strode into the tent, bellowing, 'Get out of my tent, Jago! Take all your Sump-damned bloody undercover foot-soldiers with you! No Cawdors! Out! GET OUT!'

Skelter whipped his head from left to right. He thought of shutters closing over windows, or a shroud of fog descending on the silt wastes. Suddenly all across the stands there were no eyes to meet, no expressions to watch – just rows of featureless masks. There were no eyes visible, just dark holes, but he could still feel their stares burning into him. His hand squirmed by his side where his holster normally was.

There was a rush of words from the befuddled, unmasked faces left sitting – less than a third of the crowd now.

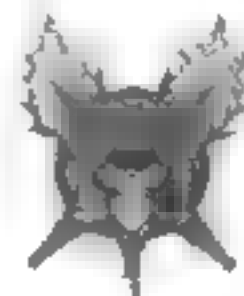
'Hey what--'

'But why are they all--'

'Is this part of the--'

'Get your guns, this is--'

Skelter ground his teeth, and then Tara punched his arm and yelled 'Run!'. As gunmetal glinted all around the ring, they sprinted for the entrance and the curses, battle-cries and prayers of the Cawdor mob rose to a roar.



THEY PELTED OUT OF the tent and scattered into the dark. Around the rim of the camp they could hear gunshots and shouts. A flash and a shower of sparks from inside had them moving again, racing for weapons. People were at the trailer ahead of them. Starkey was scrabbling at the gun locker, half-sobbing to himself. Skelter grabbed him and spun him around. His hair was sweat-slick and his eyes stared.

'What's happening? What's happening?' Tara pushed past them.

'They went after the kids. They started shooting at the south side when Kamusz found them over to the west. They fired past us at where the kids were. This isn't a terror raid, Skel, they mean business!'

Skelter felt his stomach churn. 'Alright, we're going to fix this. Take an autogun and get back out. You and Genca cover the sideshow enclosures, where you were.' Starkey took a breath and nodded. Tara stood up, pulling a drab grey coverall on over the sparkling suit she had worn in the ring.

'Who's hurt, Starkey, who'd they get?'

'Gia got burnt when one of them fired a hotshot shell and it splashed, uh, they were, oh Emperor's name, they were throwing grenades, Kantor, you know, my son, they shot my son, he was screaming—'

'Who's dead?' Skelter fought the urge to shake him.

Starkey shook his head and wiped sweat from his face. 'Nobody so far, I don't think, people were hurt, the kids were hurt and we had to carry them to the wagons...'

Tara turned around with a shotgun in her hand and revenge written in her face. He heard a scrape and clack as Eva locked a live clip into each of her pistols.

'Genca, you and Starkey get going. Eva, cover the tent entrance as long as you can!' The fat man nodded and led the way off through the camp, and Eva ducked back the way they'd come.

A fresh burst of gunfire made Skelter and Tara spin around. The Cawdors were trying to storm out of the tent, but the mass of regular punters had its own ideas. There were just enough bystanders to clog the narrow aisles and create knots of shouting, brawling people at each tent-flap. Skelter grinned despite the sick anger building up in his gut – the advantage was to the bystanders, and the Cawdors couldn't fire in the swirling mob without hitting one another. The erstwhile show-goers were punching, stabbing and pistol-whipping with impunity, and the stands were rocking and threatening to give way. There was a crunch and a chorus of screams from inside, and Skelter realised that Cheev had used the controls in the master booth to drop the target gantry for Eva's act onto the rioters below. He let out a hiss of triumph and grabbed two autopistols

from a rack, just as Cheev himself came scampering out of the tent with three Cawdors on his heels.

Tara dropped to one knee and put a man-stopper shell through the first, and Skelter cut down the second with a quick double-burst. The third dropped his chainsword and sprinted for the gates. Cheev gave them a grin, white teeth flashing, then reached for his pursuers' weapons.

'They were shooting at the *kids*!' Tara yelled. 'We need to get to the main trailer and make it safe.' Skelter bit back a foul taste in his mouth and ran after her as she flitted through the dark maze between metal wagon-walls.

'Tara, this is my fault! Emperor's eyes, Tara, I played stupid games with that Cawdor bastard, I pushed him too hard, they came back and they—'

'Not your fault and you know it! Shut up and— DOWN!'

Tara dropped and Skelter followed her. A smear of plasma hissed overhead, splashing the wagon behind them. A grinning, dwarfish Cawdor took aim again as, behind him, a hulk of a man in nothing but leggings and mask hefted a grenade launcher. Skelter tried to move even as he thought won't make it before it recharges but then something thrummed by his ear. There was a solid CHANK and both Cawdors seemed to loll oddly in the dim light until Skelter realised they had both been speared into the metal wall behind them. He looked around.

Behind him, Issig had already put the butt of his harpoon gun on the ground and had pulled another shaft, solid steel and wrist-thick, out of his quiver. His arms bulged as he forced it down, then the spring clicked into place and he pulled the weapon up under his arm, disappearing into the twilight again. They clambered up and Tara pointed ahead: the main trailer lay just across from them.

'I thought you'd made Issig get rid of that thing.'

'I thought he had! I vote he keeps it after this.'

They scurried across the open ground. Skelter, moving backwards with pistols

hunting the air, thought he saw gun-muzzles in every shadow and hunched over. Behind him, Tara hauled a door half-open and he heard children's cries.

'Kray!' Tara called. 'Who's in there with you?'

Kray was supporting a baby in one arm and cradling a tri-barrelled laspistol in the other. The bandage around the baby's chest was spotted with stains that looked black in the dim light. 'We got the kids away, they'd all been playing out by the fire. They ran right up there—'

'We've got that area covered. I think they're gone again. Who's in there?'

'All Starkey's kids, not badly hurt, just shaken up. Gia, and Eva's baby niece and Cheev's little brother, and Jayden's little girl. An-wei and her three are down the back there. Jayden's in here with the medical stuff, she's working on the hurt ones.' Skelter could see Tara's eyes narrowing, and he knew his own looked the same.

Kray looked stricken. 'I couldn't see Lee or Canda. They went running off to find you, Skelter, and the masked men were shooting—'

Tara slammed the door and spun around, grabbed shells from the pack at her hip. Her voice was clipped and level. 'We go to the hotspots first, then? Once we know they aren't there, we double back toward the tent and start looking.' Skelter nodded and they were running again.



KAMUSZ STEPPED over a dead Cawdor, his shotgun on his back, stub-gun in one hand, power-maul in the other. Around him, the mutant cages howled and rattled under their armour-cloth tarps – no chance of letting the animals out into the teeth of a firefight, not like this morning.

Two gangers were crouching by the corner of the wagon, intent on priming the bombs they carried as shells ricocheted around them. Kamusz began

the maul on its arc even as he glided forward and the first dropped in a shower of sparks. The other spun around and Kamusz drove the stubber into his gut. His body silenced the shots, then he dropped and Kamusz stepped out of the alley.

This was where they had had their campfire. Three Cawdors were here still, their backs to him as they shot at shapes lurking among the wagons. The troupe's fire stopped when Kamusz appeared and the Cawdors stood up to give chase, thinking their enemy routed. Kamusz dropped two of them with quick headshots and clouted the third with the maul: he had thumbed the setting up and the flash of power took the man's face along with his mask. Issig and the others ran forward from their positions and then stopped. The massive figure slowly pointed over Kamusz's shoulder.

Kamusz didn't need to ask why. He could tell what the looks on their faces meant. He was lowering his weapons even as the voice from behind him boomed: '*You move and he dies.*'



TARA AND SKELTER had split up at the mech-shop wagon and now she headed for the perimeter. The shooting was tailing off and there were no fires. A shape appeared balanced on a shoulder-high trailer coupling.

'Repent and Redeem!' the Cawdor howled as he raised an autogun, but Tara didn't slow: she swerved in, pulled her knees up and ran two paces up the side of the trailer, kicked out and backflipped. The burst ricocheted off the metal behind her and she hit ground, rolled and fired a hotshot shell that toppled the Cawdor down next to her. He screamed and kicked in the flames, but weakly, and she took the time to spit an old Ratskin curse her grandmother had taught her. The man let out another cry, and she crushed his knee with the stock and left him to burn. She rounded the corner and

hurdled a dead, masked body, but the scene by the remains of the campfire turned her limbs to lead. The shotgun sagged in her grasp and she stopped.



SKELTER FIRED A long burst from each pistol, and the masked woman with the grenades staggered back and fell. He took two steps forward and looked at the little crowd beyond her: all hooded and armed, but stymied and uncertain.

Amateurs playing at gangers, he thought, who don't know that in real life people shoot back. One began to raise a gun. Skelter saw the little girl with bloodied bandages around her in his mind. *My fault.*

He raised the gun before they could fire and began long, sweeping bursts that scattered them and felled them and chased the rest of them, yipping and wailing, off into the dark. His pistols juddered and jammed, and he let them drop to his sides. He felt exhausted, and turned toward the camp... and heard Jago's voice roaring out his name.

'SKELTER! SHOW YOURSELF!' Jago held the boy in one elbow, the muzzle of his plasma pistol grinding back and forth against Lee's temple. One of Jago's boots pinned Canda's hand to the ground; she whimpered but would not cry.

'SKELTER! I know these are your children! Let me see you NOW!'

'No need to shout, Jago. Just turn around. Look, no pistols this time, no needler in the sleeve.' Skelter walked slowly into the firelight, hands spread by his sides. Jago lifted his foot, and Canda withdrew her hand. He kicked her hard as she got up to run: she cried out but moved fast. The Cawdor dragged Lee back until the two of them stood by at the very edge of the camp, his back to the side of their one, prized power-wagon.

'There you are, vermin, you see? The little bitch back as a token of faith, although Emperor knows the only faith she'll know is that of the scum who

spawned her. What faith do you know, any of you? What? WHAT FAITH?'

Holy Emperor and all the Saints and Primarchs, Skelter thought, if you can hear me, help me now. This man has a gun to my son's head, and I am watching as he goes mad before my eyes. Please, help me now...

'Your filth may have broken my dearest brothers and sisters, but you will be the ones to weep and cry when the Emperor gathers us up! He will say to us "How have you proven your rotted souls that I might deliver you from the fire and agony", and we will point to where you wallow in your, your decay and your corruption and the, the spittle and vomit in which you have coated your souls, and we will say to our Emperor: We have lived by your Word, we have spread fire and anger and blood everywhere we looked, and when they came to spoil us with laughter and wine and lust and mutants and... and... We are Cawdor. We are CAWDOR!' The hand holding the pistol was starting to shake, and Jago's voice was growing jagged.

'There's a latch by your shoulder, Jago.' Tara's voice seemed to jolt the man out of a daze. He looked at her and Skelter thought he saw his arm loosen. He prayed Lee would run when he had the chance.

'Open the flap there. Are we really going to be able to pull anything before you can fire?' She glanced at Kamusz as she spoke, a look that said 'Try nothing'. Kamusz nodded. Moving like a sleepwalker, Jago tapped the cover up and looked at the brass scrollwork.

'It opens the hatch next to you. Lee knows how to work it, and if you let him, he will. We'll all move back while you get in. You can walk down through the wagon to the cab. It'll take you out of town and away from the Watch. And then you can sell it or burn it or whatever you want. And you'll be away.'

Skelter looked from Jago to Tara. Her eyes were wide and dark and watchful. *What the hell is she doing?*

'Lee, it's alright, trust me. You can open it. I know you're normally not allowed to, but it's alright.' Jago's arm loosened, and the boy wriggled free. Lee's little hand

went out, twisted the switch. There was a clunk and the hatch jolted as it unlocked. The window in its top reflected firelight. Tara started to say something, and then Jago gave Lee a gentle little push. The boy took an uncertain step, shot a look over his shoulder, and ran.

And behind him Jago raised the pistol.

'And as a reward, child, I am going to send you to the Emperor and save you from these—'

They never found out what he was going to call them. Skelter ran forward but Tara was quicker. His feet seemed to slow and there seemed to be time to look around and see everything happening around him with stately, dreamlike pace. Tara dived and grabbed, spun to protect Lee with her back. Next to Skelter, Eva's arm dipped and her laspistol was in her hand and a single silent trail of light drilled through Jago's elbow and sent his own shot into the girders high over their heads. The man had time for one scream before he staggered backward and heaved the hatch open, scrabbling for the machete at his belt.

By the time Skelter's roared curses could pass his lips, Jago was backing through the hatch, craning around as though he'd heard something move behind him... And Issig scooped up his empty speargun, eyeing the distance as he did so, and threw it underarm in a lazy, end-over-end arc that knocked Jago sprawling into the wagon. Light flooded out as the movement triggered interior lamps, and the hatch thumped shut again. Skelter took his first breath in what seemed like hours, ran to his son and rounded on the rest of them.

'What are you waiting for? Get to the cab and get him!'

Still no one moved. Tara raised an eyebrow.

'You never do remember where anything's parked, do you?'

Skelter stared at her.

'That's the Ripperjack wagon.'

As he turned, despite himself, to stare, the shouts of the Watch and the Arbites klaxons sounded from the surrounding tunnels. Something appeared at the little window in the wagon hatch. Something

red and tattered that screamed and beat at the glass until it collapsed against the window, leaving a scarlet stain as it was dragged out of sight.



IT WAS WARM when they rode out for Ashclam. Skelter and Tara sat together on the steering platform of the lead tractor, the wagons and trailers spread out behind them and the buggies with their rattling little methane engines scooting past to take point. Issig had been allowed out when they were out of sight of the settlement and had dozed off on the roof of his trailer, a half-gnawed bone in his hand. Skelter had wondered if it really had been a Cawdor icon he'd seen dangling on a bracelet around that bone that morning, but he'd let it slide.

Tara yawned. 'What's Ashclam like? I only want quiet places for a while after this. At least with one thing and another no one thought to stir up trouble about Issig the way they normally do. But we were lucky to get out of it as well as we did, you know.'

'I know.' Skelter's face was set.

'I didn't mean it that way. It wasn't your fault, Skel. Jago was a freak, something was wrong with him. He'd have come out shooting, no matter what we did.'

He nodded, and they rode in silence for a while.

'We'll be fine. We're doing well. We're making money, got our permits. One day soon we'll get a Hive City gig, just like you said. And from there, it's just up and up.'

Skelter nodded again. They could just see the distant dot of light that was the giant road-pipe leading uphive to the Ashclam trail, and around them the dome walls curved up into dimness. After a while, Tara put her head on Skelter's shoulder. The lights of the buggies criss-crossed in the middle distance. And above their heads, the bloodstained Cawdor mask hanging from the roll bar swung and twisted on its thong. Skelter always had been a sucker for souvenirs. ●

TWO BLOOD ANGELS AND A
CALLIDUS ASSASSIN HAVE
ESCAPED PLANET OBZIDION
TO TRY AND PREVENT THE
BOMBARDMENT OF THE CAPITAL.
UNKNOWN TO THE IMPERIUM
MILLIONS OF SOULS ARE HIDDEN
BENEATH THE CITY, READY FOR
SACRIFICE TO THE CHAOS GODS.

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Eleven

SCRIPT & ART: DAVID PUGH

PLAGUE DAEMONS
WERE ABOARD OUR SHIP,
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!

YOU ARE LOSING
YOUR GIFT, TROILUS!

YOU'VE
BETRAYED
US!

KILL THE
TRAITORS!

DAKKA
DAKKA
DAKKA

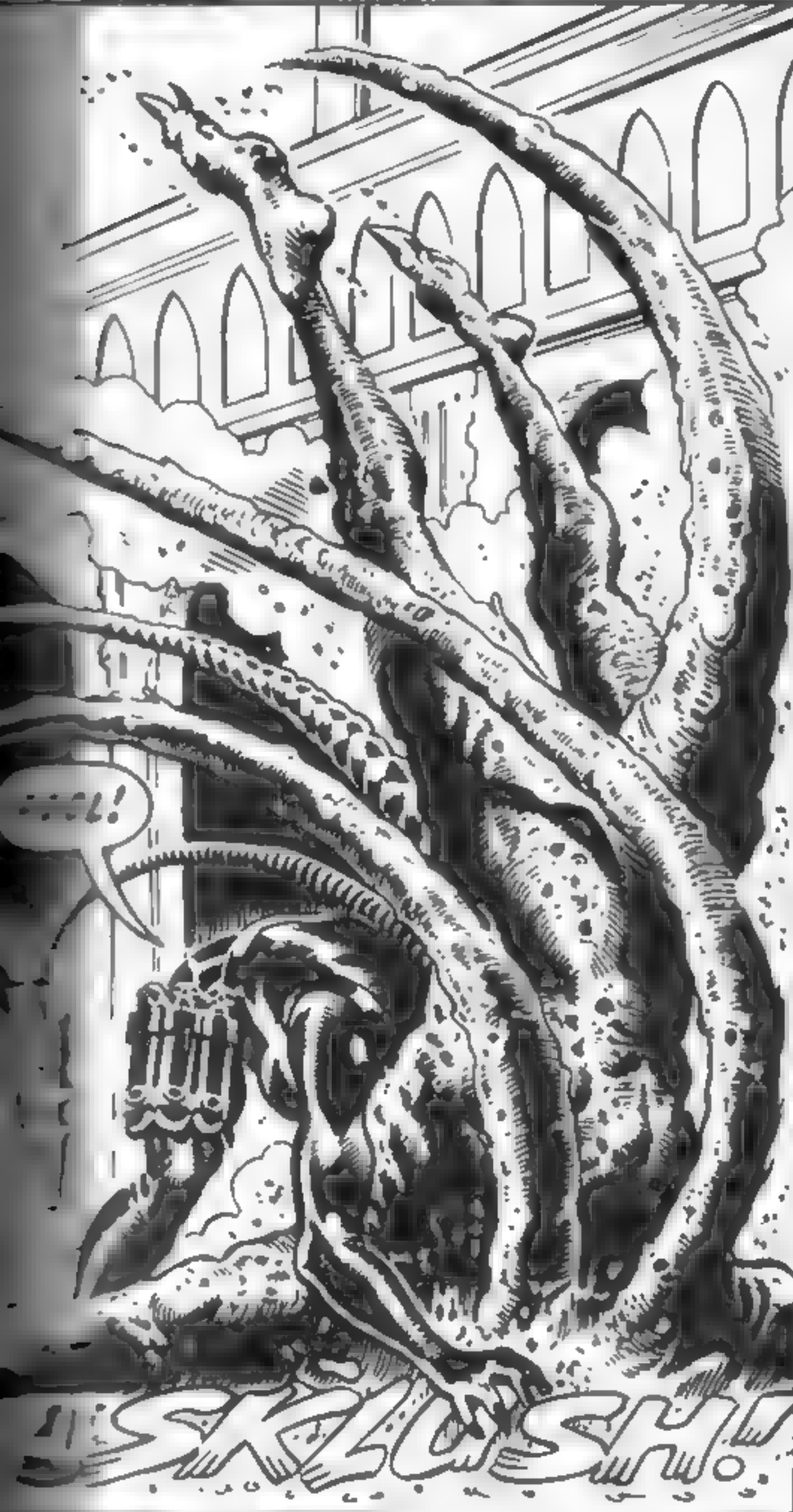
SAVE YOUR
FIRE FOR THE
PLAGUE
DAEMONS!

THEY ARE
TRAITOR
MARINES!
KILL THEM
KILL THEM!!

I'LL BE OF MORE USE REACHING
THE CONTROL CHAMBER.

FEMALE...
ESCAPES!

DAKKA
DAKKA
DAKKA





DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE... DAMN, WHERE IS PIOS?

WHAT IN THE NAME OF MERCY!?!

SWITCH!

DAKKA DAKKA DAKKA DAKKA!

AAARGH!



AHH, I SEE IT NOW, IT ASSAULTS MY SENSES.

WELL, IT OFFENDS MINE!



SUCH JOYFUL SOULS! SUCH SPIRITED FLESH, LET US **SPEED** THEM TO THEIR DEATH!

RAAARGH!

AAAAARGH!

EEEEERGH!



WELL, LITTLE MAN, SHOOT ME IF YOU WILL BUT I HAVE A SCORE TO SETTLE WITH THOSE CHAOS SCUM.

UUURGH



AND I THINK YOU NEED THE HELP!

CHAAAAARGE!!

DAKKA DAKKA DAKKA DAKKA!



NOW, COMMANDER, SET THESE *NEW* CO-ORDINATES FOR THE BOMBARDMENT.

BUT THAT'S NOT THE CITY...WE MUST DESTROY OBZIDION.



I UNDERSTAND YOUR RETICENCE, COMMANDER, BUT REALLY I MUST INSIST.

very well... I'LL DO IT.



A PUNY MAN, WITH BROKEN SWORD, NO MATCH FOR THE DARK POWER OF MY LORD.

HNNNNH!

RAAAARGH!

KABLAN!

AAARGH!

HOW



STER, WE HAVE NO TIME, S DOWN TO YOU NOW.

++HAVE FAITH BROTHERS, HAVE FAITH!++



THE FLAGSHIP DIVINE OVERLORD, SUPREME IMPERIAL HEADQUARTERS OF LORD MILITANT COMMANDER TAMMUZ BELARIAN.

BOMBARDMENT COUNTDOWN MINUS 10--9--8

PROCEED...

5--4--3 --2--1-- FIRE!

LORD, WE MAY HAVE A MINOR PROBLEM...

TO BE CONTINUED.

THE BLESSED ONES

By Rant Kellock

SIGMAR, STOP *your hammering!* Jurgen Kuhnslieb thought, as the throbbing pain in his head intensified. He winced and shielded his face as the inn door creaked open, admitting a bright lance of sunlight which seemed to pierce his very eyeballs. Grimacing, Jurgen gestured to the barkeep, who turned and studied him with a dour expression.

'My usual,' Jurgen said; it was more of a groan than a sentence. The barkeep looked unimpressed. The customer slumped before him – with his shabby slept-in clothes, his cropped black hair and dark, blood-shot eyes set into a keen, blowsy face – already owed money and did not look to be paying up any time soon.

'You've not paid your tab from last night,' the barkeep rumbled.

'Come on,' Jurgen moaned, struggling vainly through his hangover to muster some charm, 'just one. For your favourite customer.' The barkeep looked away. 'Look, I'll have the money in a few days. There's this man coming in from Altdorf...' Jurgen trailed off as the barkeep turned away in disinterest.

Sigmar! Jurgen thought; another place in Nuln he couldn't get served. If this kept up, he'd soon end up barred from every establishment in the city. If only that last job hadn't gone so terribly wrong – Heinrick and Eberhardt betrayed and slaughtered, and Rolf good only for begging since he was caught by Pharsos's men – they would all have been rich, at least for a little while. And Jurgen wouldn't be slinking around in dives like this trying to avoid Hultz the Red-Eyed, the small time crime-baron who seemed to think the

whole mess had somehow been his fault; probably for no better reason that he was the only one who had survived the bungled job with all his appendages intact. Then there was the other matter: a few gambling debts which had, well, got out of hand. No wonder Jurgen was rapidly becoming very unpopular in this city.

Jurgen became aware that a particular kind of silence had descended on the inn, of a sort usually reserved for the presence of the city watch, or strangers who were obviously out of place. Jurgen resisted the impulse to turn around, not wishing to attract attention.

A young man, the apparent cause of the hush, sauntered up to the bar next to Jurgen and gestured imperiously to the barkeep. He was dressed in fine clothes, and clearly in the wrong part of town.

'Tell me, do you know a man name of Jurgen?' the newcomer addressed the barkeep. His manner was languid, but his dark eyes held an intensity that to Jurgen did not bode well. The barkeep risked a glance at Jurgen, who shook his head almost imperceptibly, but the young man caught the exchange and he span like a cat to face Jurgen.

'No need for alarm, sir,' the man smirked, his eyes coming to rest on Jurgen's left hand as it inched towards the knife concealed beneath his jacket. Jurgen paused, waiting for the stranger's next move. 'I've sought you out in order to offer you employment.'

'What are you talking about?' Jurgen said, taking the opportunity to size up the stranger. His dark eyes were set into a

handsome, though somewhat pallid face; one which – by both appearance and demeanour – indicated a kinship to one of Nuln's noble families. His head was crowned by neat fair hair which fell loose over his shoulders, which Jurgen noted were somewhat stooped.

'I have come here on behalf of my master, who wishes you to... acquire a certain item for him.' The man studied Jurgen, his voice low. 'A very special item.'

Jurgen leaned forward and hissed: 'Not here, you idiot!' The thief flicked his eyes toward the barkeep, who was standing too close, steadily ignoring the impatient cries of thirsty patrons and cleaning an already spotless glass. The noble's smile tightened, but he nodded to the private booths at the rear of the inn and strode towards them purposefully. Jurgen followed cautiously, quickly checking that the knives secreted throughout his person were accessible.

Both men seated themselves in the enclosed booth and once again appraised each other. There was a moment of charged silence, broken first by Jurgen: 'So who are you? Who's your "master"?'

'My master wishes to remain anonymous, and who I am is not important.' The habitual smirk returned to the face of the young man. 'You may call me Randolph.'

Jurgen suddenly realised where he had seen the stoop-shouldered look that this Randolph possessed: it was common among the students of Nuln's famous University. Being wealthy and unused to manual work, they quickly became hunched when forced to lug about huge tomes of lore. Perhaps this Randolph was also a student at the University; this would explain his pale complexion – the more diligent students barely saw the light of day, spending their time endlessly studying books in the huge university library.

'Alright, "Randolph". What's the job?'

'My master has long wished to acquire a certain object, which recently came to his attention as being in the possession of a local merchant specialising in exotic artefacts,' Randolph paused, and fished a small pipe from his pocket. 'However, the dealer was not willing to part with the piece, much to my master's sorrow. Now we must resort to more discreet methods

of obtaining the painting.'

'A painting?' Jurgen asked, incredulous. 'You want me to steal a painting?'

'It's not an overly large piece; you should be able to carry it alone. Once you have the painting out of the place it's stored in, you'll only need to move it a short distance to where we can take it off your hands,' Randolph filled the pipe with a pinch of herbs, and pulled a flint from his pocket.

'What are you offering,' Jurgen grimaced as the lit pipe began to emit sickly sweet fumes, 'assuming I accept this job?'

'Oh, you'll accept. One hundred gold crowns now, and nine hundred more once we have the painting.' Randolph paused for a languid draw from the pipe. 'The amount is non-negotiable.'

Jurgen felt his jaw go slack. This fee was totally out of his league; the old gang would have been happy to pull two hundred crowns for a job. *Sigmar!* Jurgen thought. *Just who does he think I am?* Jurgen recovered himself and found Randolph studying him, a quizzical expression on his face.

'S-sounds fair... Hmm.' Jurgen did his utmost to appear casual.

'You accept the commission?' Randolph arched his eyebrows.

'Uh... Of course,' Jurgen smiled weakly.

'Very well. Here's your advance,' Randolph said, rising from his seat and nonchalantly tossing a bag bulging with coins onto the table. 'The merchant is Otto Grubach, of Tin Street, in the Merchant's Quarter. The painting lies within a safe inside his office.'

'What's the painting?'

'The piece is titled *The Blessed Ones*, by the artist Hals,' Randolph said. He carefully extinguished his pipe and replaced it in a pouch by his side. 'I shall meet you in two days, here, to discuss delivery. That'll give you time to examine the premises.'

'Fine.' Jurgen grasped the bag and weighed it in his hands. 'Uh, look: what made you choose me for this?'

'You came highly recommended by a previous employer – a man known as Hultz.' Randolph flashed a knowing grin and strode purposefully from the booth.

Oh Sigmar, Jurgen thought, as his insides lurched with dread.

GETTING INSIDE Nuln University was no problem for Jurgen, who had a carefully nurtured friendship with the regular gate guard. It had been some time since he'd last had cause to visit the academy, but the feeling of discomfort he experienced with each visit returned on cue. It was more than just the intellectual and social snobbery of the university's inhabitants which set Jurgen on edge: there were the stories, whispered in the dark corners of taverns throughout Nuln, concerning terrible and secretive goings-on within the academy walls. Of course, Jurgen was too much of a sceptic to believe even part of most of the tales he heard, but he was also cautious enough not to dismiss them out of hand. As the old saying went, *Where there's smoke there may well be dragons...*

Jurgen was here this time, within the musty dormitory complex, visiting an old friend, Klaus von Rikkenburg II. Klaus was the third-in-line to the Rikkenburg family fortune, built over centuries from the local wine trade. Klaus rejected the traditional third son profession of priest and elected instead to study at Nuln's famous university, a decision his family welcomed.

They were less impressed when he proceeded to almost completely ignore his official studies in order to pursue regular extensive studies into the quality of his family's vineyard produce, and its market competitors, alongside much research into the anatomy of local womenfolk. His family concluded Klaus had 'fallen in with bad sorts', which – as Klaus proudly pointed out – his association with Jurgen was testimony to. Jurgen considered Klaus a good friend, one that had not hesitated in the past to use his influence and intelligence to help him out of not a few tight spots.

'It's good to see you again, old man.' Klaus, having fixed his guest a drink, swept the clutter from an ancient-looking chair and seated himself. 'Where in Ulric's name have you been these last few months?'

'Uh, you know, saving the Empire and all that.' Jurgen glanced around the small dormitory room and shifted awkwardly; he'd made a seat of a low, over-stuffed cushion and was beginning to regret it. 'Well, I suppose I've been in a bit of trouble actually.'

'Really? Jurgen, I *am* shocked,' Klaus grinned, raising a mocking eyebrow.

'That's not important. I wanted to ask you about someone.'

'Yes?'

'I got approached by this young aristocratic-looking man who wanted me to do this job, right? Only he wouldn't tell me his real name, or who he was working for.' Jurgen paused for a quick sip of the spicy-sweet wine Klaus poured for him. 'Thing is, I reckon he looked a bit like he could be a student of the university, so I thought you might know him.'

'There are a lot of students at this university Jurgen,' Klaus paused to gulp down a half-glass of wine. 'Well I suppose it's worth a try. What's he look like?'

'About my height, pale, dark eyes, blond hair down to his shoulders—'

'You just described half of the student population,' Klaus smirked.

'Smoked some horrible sickly-sweet weed, smirked a lot, bit of a fool. Come to think of it, he reminded me of you.'

'This tobacco, it smelt a bit like rancid perfume? I don't believe it!' Klaus seemed genuinely surprised. 'That sounds... Tell me, did he walk around like this?' Klaus stood and did an impeccable burlesque of Randolph's haughty demeanour.

Jurgen laughed loudly, almost spilling wine all over himself. 'Yeah, that's the one. Then again, all you aristocrats look that way to us common folk.'

Klaus grinned. 'It sounds like Eretz Habemauer; he was in my art history class. He's been smoking that disgusting Araby weed ever since he took up with Count Romanov last year.'

'Who's he?' Jurgen leaned forward, carefully setting his wine on the floor.

'Lives on the Hill. There are some odd stories about him. There used to be a lot of big parties in his manor, but they stopped because many of the noble families didn't approve of the things happening at them.'

'What do you mean? What was going on?'

'Well, I don't know for sure. But some say that they were taking riffraff – if you'll pardon the expression – off the street and, well, using them for entertainment.' Klaus paused while he carefully refilled his glass. 'Eventually all the bodies began turning up and people started asking questions, so his

little soirees stopped. Or perhaps the Count has been more discreet since.'

'By the gods...' Jurgen leaned back, exhaling slowly. 'So what's Habemauer to Count Romanov?'

'Romanov seems to have taken him as his protege, and now it seems Eretz shares the Count's mania for exotic intoxicants and obscure relics. He really is a clown.' Klaus snorted with derision. 'Did he really ask you to do a job?'

'Yeah. He offered a heap of money, on behalf of his "master", for me to steal a painting. By someone, Hals or something—'

'Hals?' Klaus demanded sharply.

'Um, I think—'

'Not *The Blessed Ones*?' Klaus stared at Jurgen intently.

'Yes. What do you know about this?'

'I studied the finer arts once, mainly to annoy my parents, and gave a dissertation on mythological art: ancient pieces which are legendary, despite the fact that nobody can be sure they even exist. *The Blessed Ones*, by Hals, was one such piece: rumours of its whereabouts keep turning up but the painting's never been found,' Klaus pondered his wine glass for a moment, swirling the contents gently. 'The thing is, well, this old painting was supposed to grant the possessor, erm, eternal life. So, well, naturally, many people are interested in finding it.'

'Then this could be big...' Jurgen was standing abruptly to leave. 'Klaus, I'd better go. Do you think you could find out any more about this painting, or Romanov?'

'I can try.' Klaus sat forward but did not rise. 'So this painting is in Nuln?'

Jurgen offered a guarded shrug of his shoulders by way of a reply. 'Thanks for all your help, Klaus,' he said, before briskly turning to leave.

'Not at all, friend,' Klaus called as Jurgen hurried out of the door, slamming it shut behind him. The impact stirred up motes of dust coating the ancient door frame. 'Not at all.'



JURGEN DODGED his way across the city, hurrying through dingy lanes and twisting back alleys. Few knew Nuln as Jurgen did, which was the only reason he had managed to evade Pharsos's men when the last operation had blown up in their faces. Jurgen would be sad to leave this place, but he suspected his departure from this corner of the Old World was long overdue.

As he raced through Nuln's filth-strewn streets, already choked with the first leaves of autumn, Jurgen's mind sped. He knew Hultz was out for his blood, so being hired at his advice could only mean this job was, in one way or another, a death sentence. His every instinct told him to stay away from this strange employer and his obscure artwork. And yet... if this priceless painting really lay within the merchant Grubach's shop, then a solution to Jurgen's cash-flow problems could be at hand.

Jurgen slowed as he reached the end of an unkempt alley, stepping over an unconscious drunkard, to find himself facing the small merchant's house lying at the end of Tin Street. Ducking back into the alley, he squatted down against a broken crate. Fishing a small hand-mirror of beaten brass and a tiny wooden box from the pockets of his jacket, Jurgen proceeded to apply the contents of the box – a pair of dark eyebrows and a styled goatee – to his face. He carefully moulded these new features until he was satisfied they appeared authentic. Jurgen contemplated his rather shabby clothing for a moment, reflecting that it was a pity he could not afford the time to purchase a more appropriate outfit. Or the money, of course.

Taking a deep breath, Jurgen assumed the bearing of a servant on an important errand and strode purposefully from the alley. He stopped smartly before the narrow, two-storey building, adorned with worn, leering gargoyles. The building was flush with its neighbour on one side, with an alley on the other. Approaching the double front doors, he heard faint sounds from within. He rapped briskly on a solid door.

The noises inside ceased for a moment, then cautious heavy footsteps approached.

The clunk of a beam lifting was heard from within, and the door opened slightly to reveal a thick-set man. His face – a jigsaw of scars – held an expression of extreme annoyance, which only deepened at the sight of Jurgen.

'We're closed,' the man growled. Jurgen quickly shoved his foot into the small space. He had to suppress a howl of pain as the man slammed the door on to his leather boot.

'Take your foot out of the door, now, or you'll be carrying it home in a sack.' The scarred man's voice dripped with malice.

'My master would be most disappointed if I returned without having spoken to the merchant Grubach,' Jurgen contorted his voice into the whining-yet-superior speech common to the servants of nobility.

'You ain't hearing too good,' the man snarled, and pushed his face closer to Jurgen's. 'We're closed. Begone, you worm!'

Jurgen struggled to maintain his composure as he felt the man's hot breath on his face, and was about to back off when he heard the faint shuffle of a second figure behind scar-face. Jurgen stretched to peer around the thug's head at the interior of the store, and was rewarded with a glimpse of a rather pudgy figure peering at him from round the corner of an ornate dresser. The figure immediately ducked back behind the antique.

Jurgen raised his voice: 'A pity! Lord DeNunzio will be most upset. I had come to lay a considerable bid for-'

'Lord DeNunzio sent you?' The pudgy figure said, emerging cautiously into the light. Jurgen resisted the impulse to smile; the invocation of the name of one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the city rarely failed to gain the attention of those of a mercantile persuasion.

'Yes, Herr Grubach. His Lordship was most interested in a piece you have acquired.' Jurgen did his best to speak confidently; not easily done with the thug snarling into his face.

'Well, of course!' The merchant's manner changed, a congenial tone entering his voice, although he still appeared extremely nervous. 'Come in, do! Please allow the poor man in, Hans.'

Hans scowled, but stood back from the door and gestured impatiently for Jurgen to enter. Jurgen stepped smartly into the store, then proceeded to make a show of smoothing down his clothes and examining his boot for scuff marks. Hans's scowl deepened. Jurgen took this opportunity to quickly scan the cluttered store.

'DeNunzio's page boys are lookin' pretty shabby these days,' Hans rumbled sarcastically.

Jurgen ignored him imperiously, as did Grubach. 'Which piece was your master interested in?' The merchant wrung his hands, and glanced about distractedly. Jurgen got the feeling that Grubach wished to get rid of him as quickly, though as politely, as possible.

'A certain vase. Milord provided me with a detailed description... Ah! I believe that is the very piece there.' Jurgen indicated a large vase, which stood at the head of some stairs to the rear of the shop.

'Ah... I'm terribly afraid that piece has been, hmm, sold.' The refusal came haltingly from Grubach, and Jurgen could see he was cursing himself for selling for what must have been a far inferior price to that which would be offered by one of the wealthiest men in Nuln. 'Still, I should think Lord DeNunzio would have nothing to do with such... such an inferior piece. Perhaps he would be more interested in something like this?'

Jurgen was led through the cluttered store to examine various vases, urns and other assorted containers. Grubach became increasingly agitated, casting nervous glances about each time he ushered Jurgen to the next piece. Hans, by contrast, was like a rock, unflinchingly inspecting Jurgen's every move.

A section of the second storey had been cleared of artefacts, and a large tub half-full of water had been placed beneath a leaking section of ceiling. 'Must be quite a hazard in this business,' Jurgen commented pleasantly. Grubach assented, grumbling that the roof repairer was due but had not yet shown.

It took less than twenty minutes for Grubach to show Jurgen every piece of glassware and pottery in the place. Only

one section of the shop remained unseen: a door to the rear of the building, which judging by the layout of the building led to a fairly small room.

'Any more pieces through here?' Jurgen asked casually, knowing he was pushing things.

'No! Em, no, just my office.' A look of panic crossed Grubach's eyes for a moment, before he brought himself back under control.

Hans placed a heavy hand on Jurgen's shoulder, gripping it tightly: 'You've seen all the pieces that are for sale,' he said, talking slowly and deliberately, 'and I think it's time you left to consult with your master. Don't you?'

It was Grubach, strangely, who answered the somewhat rhetorical question. 'Er, yes,' the merchant appeared rather distressed, caught between the need for politeness to the servant of a powerful man, and his need to be rid of the same, 'I do have some pressing tasks to attend to, so if that's all...'

'More than sufficient, thank you,' Jurgen began moving towards the front doors, though in truth he had little choice since he was being bodily propelled towards them by Hans' vice-like grip on his shoulder, 'Lord DeNunzio will be most grateful for your time.'

Jurgen was shoved onto the street, tripping and falling into the dust at the final push from Hans. The door slammed shut, and the heavy bolt slid loudly back into place. Jurgen rose and dusted himself off, thinking hard. He was sure from the way Grubach had behaved that the painting was present, and the theft actually seemed relatively simple. There were obviously complicating factors: he would be working alone, for one thing. Grubach's nervous manner did not bode well either. Romanov had probably alarmed him with suspiciously large bids on the painting. Jurgen suspected that if the burglary was not performed immediately – which meant tonight – the piece would most likely be transported to a safer location. That did not leave long to arrange matters...

Jurgen strode off briskly down the street, remembering to retain his servant's poise until he was some streets away.

From the alley opposite the house, a dark figure emerged, looking decidedly sober now. The figure paused to make sure it was not seen, then skulked off after Jurgen.



WOODEN SHINGLES shifted under Jurgen's feet as he stepped cautiously across the rooftop. He checked his movement for a moment, and then crept on more carefully, testing gingerly for loose tiles in the darkness with the point of his boot. His planning would all be for naught if he lost his footing now and plunged to become a bloody mess on the cobbled street below. The faint light emitted by a thin blade of moon, poised overhead like an assassin's knife, picked out the edge of the building in front of Jurgen. He crouched down, crawling slowly to the lip of the two-story precipice. Jurgen looked down into the street briefly and then wished he hadn't: he had never been much good with heights, which was a considerable liability in his chosen profession.

Jurgen steadied himself, slowly unhooking a small device from his belt. It was essentially a compact, three-pronged grappling hook, to which was tied a length of slim and sturdy cord. It had taken almost an hour of cajoling, wheedling, and finally a sizeable deposit of gold before Konrad, a nervous, small-time fencer, had agreed to lend it.

Taking a deep breath, Jurgen regained his feet and concentrated on the stone gargoyle on the roof of Grubach's house opposite. He swung the hook around his head, letting it gather momentum before releasing it to glide across the intervening space. The grapple-iron looped about the statue and caught, one of the prongs finding purchase in the nostril of the hideous effigy. After testing the line, Jurgen secured his end of the rope to a disused flagpole.

Jurgen tried to quell his quickening breaths as he pushed himself gingerly off the roof, dropping a few feet as the line adjusted to his weight. Sigmar save me, he thought, fighting to remain calm as he dangled two stories above the cobbled

ground of the alley below. After a few deep breaths, Jurgen settled into a desperate rhythm of hand-over-hand for what seemed like hours, then suddenly found himself dangling against the opposite roof. Jurgen carefully lowered himself to the relative comfort of the tiles below him.

He rested briefly before ascending the slate roof cautiously, to the point at which the roof-leak inside the house had been. Sure enough, some of the tiles had slipped, leaving a small cavity leading into the darkness of the building's attic. Working carefully, Jurgen eased the surrounding tiles out of place, carefully piling them next to him until he had made a sizeable hole.

Jurgen lowered himself though the hole into the cluttered darkness of the attic. After some careful blundering, he managed to find his way to the trapdoor leading down into the building proper. Easing the trapdoor up gently, he surveyed the room below. Lamplight emanated upwards from the ground floor, but Jurgen heard no sign of any occupants. He slithered through, pulled a knife from his jacket, and began a stealthy descent of the staircase, checking cautiously over the banisters for possible assailants; Hans, in particular, he was not keen to face. The room appeared empty, however, the only sign of any occupancy a single lamp burning on a table.

Jurgen crept to the door Grubach had told him led to his office, listening carefully for sounds of occupancy. Once again, there was nothing.

What in Sigmar's name is going on here? Jurgen thought, as the unlocked door opened readily to his touch.

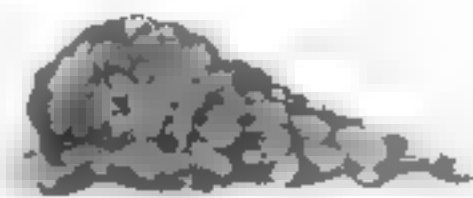
Beyond lay a small office, containing a small desk holding neat piles of documents, and a large wooden cabinet. The cabinet had evidently been moved from its regular place, where it had concealed a sizeable wall safe which now stood open and empty but for a few papers. Jurgen was almost ready to weep with frustration... when he noticed a painting, about the size of a large child, which lay propped against a low table in a shadowy corner of the room.

Jurgen carefully approached the painting. A strip of moonlight through a window provided no more than a glimpse

of the subject contained within the gilt-edged frame: the green of forest trees, the pale pink of bare flesh, and then an angular face of raw crimson, staring insane and demented from the canvas. Jurgen shuddered and turned away, feeling nauseous. Steeling himself, he turned back to check the small signature in the bottom-right corner of the canvas, and made out the name 'Sena Hals' penned in strange script.

A sheet of black cloth on a table nearby made an adequate cloak for the grotesque painting. Jurgen shouldered his prize and proceeded towards the back door that led from the office to the street.

As Jurgen moved to open the robust oak door, he noticed that it was already ajar, and swinging slightly in the autumn night breeze.



JURGEN EMERGED from the building into a narrow lane, its cobblestones slick and gleaming in the moonlight. A light rain had started, and Jurgen had trouble keeping his balance on the slippery surface as he wrestled with his bulky load. As Jurgen stumbled along, he became suddenly aware, by the innate and indefinable sixth sense which had allowed him to survive thus far in his profession, that he was being followed. He took a quick glance over his shoulder, making out a vague blacker-on-black silhouette of a figure as it crept towards him.

Jurgen slowed and peered ahead in the gloom of the lane's end, although he already knew there would be at least one more in front; footpads rarely worked alone. The few Jurgen had ever associated with had been callous, spiteful, stupid cowards. Men who lived by preying on the weak, who all feared – despite their desperate bravado – ending up like their victims: trapped, friendless, alone, bleeding to death anonymously in some dark alley.

There, a second, inching his way through the darkness. Jurgen stopped. He knew he couldn't possibly escape carrying the painting. Yet he could not leave it. The painting was his new-found hope, a way to

repay the borrowed time he had been living on. Jurgen backed up against the wall, awaiting a move from the strangers.

The stalkers knew they were spotted and emerged from the shadows. There were only two, which at least Jurgen could be thankful for, and they appeared to be typical street thugs, though well-equipped. Their swords, drawn as they approached, were of a fine make, not the usual rough-hewn barracks-quality usually wielded by street ruffians.

'Good job, Herr Jurgen,' the shorter man said, a menacing undertone belying the compliment. 'We'll handle it from here.'

Jurgen had no doubt the man's tone would not have altered one bit, were he to be uttering the phrase *Give us what we want and you won't get hurt*.

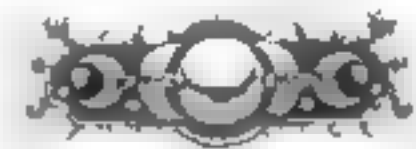
'What about my payment?' Jurgen spoke casually, desperately trying to formulate some kind of plan. 'I'm not delivering the goods until I get what... what Romanov promised me.'

'Very well. If you come with us to the Count's estate, you'll get your payment there. You don't expect us to carry that kind of money around, do you?' The short man smiled, or attempted to; a strange grimace strained his face. The taller thug, who seemed a little slow, guffawed at his companion's wit.

So Romanov is behind this after all, thought Jurgen; at any other time he would have felt pleased with his cleverness. But in the small thug's facial contortions and hard, dark eyes, Jurgen knew that the only payment that would be made at Romanov's manor would be with his own life. He had to get out of there fast. He did the only thing he could think of.

'Here you go!' Jurgen hurled the painting towards the small man, and immediately sprang towards the tall hoodlum, smashing the surprised thug in the face with a quick jab. There was a crunch of cartilage. The man screamed as he reeled backwards, one hand flying to his shattered nose. Jurgen pressed home his advantage, drawing his knife and slashing in one quick motion. The man screamed again and collapsed to the ground, clutching desperately at his side.

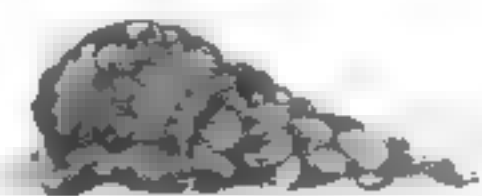
Out of the corner of his eye, Jurgen saw the smaller hoodlum, who had dropped his weapon to catch the precious canvas, scrambling forward on his knees to retrieve his sword. Jurgen span and stamped down on the base of the blade, just as the man grasped the hilt. The thug looked up, fear and defiance in his eyes. Jurgen gritted his teeth and brought the pommel of his dagger down on the man's head.



JURGEN SHOOK uncontrollably as he raced through the streets with his heavy burden, all caution gone. The immediacy of death never failed to make an impression on him. The two bloodied men he had left back there would most likely survive; Jurgen was not in the habit of killing unnecessarily, and he did not intend to start now. He had two new enemies in Nuln, however, for men like that did not easily forget such moments of vulnerability.

If he had been calmer, the thief would have been rather embarrassed to admit that he had not planned as far as where to go once he actually had the painting. So he stopped, gasping for breath in a shadowy doorway, and considered his options. He could not go to the inn he had been lodging at, nor any others, since the bulky package would start rumours flying immediately. All his regular underworld bolt-holes were off-limits, since there was no one he could trust not to hand him straight to Hultz, or even Romanov.

Jurgen was stumped for a moment, the panic welling up inside like dark spring-water, and then he had it: the one place he could go, where no one would think twice about a man carrying a strange artefact. Jurgen grinned in the darkness.



THE UNIVERSITY GATEKEEPER greeted Jurgen with a nod and detained him a moment with his latest joke, something vile about Dwarf and

Halfling procreation. Jurgen hardly listened, just chuckled politely and strode into the academy, the man still chortling behind him.

He made his way to the dormitory houses without difficulty, though several times he was amicably jostled by inebriated students returning from a long evening at the local tavern. Arriving at Klaus's small dormitory house, Jurgen set down the painting and knocked heartily on the door.

Movement sounded from within, but there was no further reaction. *Sigmar*, thought Jurgen, *he's probably completely smashed*.

'Come on, Klaus, it's me! Open up!' Jurgen hammered again.

It had been a long night; he was exhausted, frozen and scared. All of which might help to explain why not until the last, even after the door was flung open, after he was seized by rough hands and dragged into that nightmare room of blood and torment, did he suspect that anything was in the least amiss. By then, of course, it was too late.

Two huge thugs gripped Jurgen's arms, and he hung between them like a sack of grain. The small room was a shambles, although the violence done to the furnishings was minimal. There was some glass on the floor from a broken decanter, and some papers had also been trodden into the rug. It was the blood, which seemed to saturate every surface and piece of furniture in the room, which coated the floor and rug in a sticky mess, that created an impression of such brutal vandalism. The gore was from one source: Klaus von Rikkenburg II, who sat slumped in a bloodied mess, tied into a previously opulent chair by lengths of thin cord. Behind him stood Eretz Habemauer, the one Jurgen had known as 'Randolph', a gore-spattered pair of pliers in his hand and a pouting smile on his lips.

'How fortunate! Who would have thought you would have friends in such circles, Jurgen? And you have brought a little present also, hmm?' Eretz gestured to a third thug, who lifted the cover on the painting for the noble to inspect. 'Ah, how beautiful. Best put it away. Wouldn't want to contaminate the precious thing now, would we?'

The thing in the chair convulsed suddenly, then began moaning piteously. Jurgen's heart turned over; poor Klaus was still alive! Eretz appeared to derive amusement from the display, for his pout became a wry smirk.

'Your friend does have surprising endurance. Had you arrived earlier you could have enjoyed the show; I fear Herr Rikkenburg will not be with us much longer.' Eretz paused with mock regret. Jurgen's tensed with rage. 'Well, we had best be off. I think it's time for you to meet the Count.'

'Can I...' Jurgen choked on his words, though with anger or sorrow he could not tell, 'can I have...'

'Hmm? Oh yes, of course. It must be very sad for you,' Eretz said, with the indifference of handing a coin to a beggar.

Jurgen approached the mangled form of Klaus, who was suddenly beset with violent coughing. Jurgen bent to speak to his friend, though the right words escaped him.

'Klaus... I'm... Sigmar!' Jurgen mumbled, his stomach turning. 'I'm so sorry, Klaus.'

The figure jerked his head up at the sound of Jurgen's voice, its ruined face staring straight through him. 'Jurg-' An explosion of coughing. '...Is that you?'

'Yes, friend. I'm-'

'Jurgen... the pain... it's evil. Watch... blood, don't let your blo...' Klaus's body was wracked with an especially violent fit of coughing. When the attack ceased, the figure was still.

The two thugs stepped forward and seized Jurgen, and he was led away. Away from the ruined room, and from his dead, ruined friend.



JURGEN SAW LITTLE of the Romanov estate, crammed inside a darkened carriage. The manor, however, he had ample time to survey as he was pulled forcibly from the coach and shoved up the wide entrance stairs. The exterior gave an impression of ageing splendour: a once-great edifice falling into disrepair, the

combination of neglect and the passage of time taking their toll.

The interior, in contrast, contained opulence the like of which Jurgen had never before set eyes on. Its crumbling passages were graced with a plush red pile carpet, and vivid tapestries and silks hung from the walls. The huge, antiquated rooms were decorated with chairs and couches with velvet upholstery, and strange sculptures and statuettes of exotic origin.

Jurgen was led into a large study, with shelves of books lining all four walls and a fire crackling in a sizeable hearth. Reclining on an opulent chair with a large tome on his lap was a middle-aged man, tall, with dark hair greying at the temples. He turned towards the new arrivals with irritation.

‘Eretz, what is this?’ the Count – for Jurgen had no doubt this was he – spoke with annoyance, ‘What are you doing here?’

‘This is Jurgen Kuhnslieb, your lordship, the thief I hired.’ Eretz spoke proudly, like a cat triumphantly depositing the corpse of a bird onto his master’s bedroom carpet. ‘He obtained the painting, and was attempting to keep it from us, as I predicted, when we intercepted him.’

‘You have the painting?’ Romanov sat up, his eyes burning with sudden intensity.

‘I viewed it myself. We were... interrogating someone, a student, to find out what Jurgen was planning. I knew–’

‘Where is it, man?’ The count stood impatiently.

‘Fyodor and Willem are preparing it as we speak.’

Romanov nodded briskly and stalked past Eretz, who hurried after his master. Jurgen was shoved after them by his large minder.

‘So,’ Eretz was gabbling, racing to keep up with Romanov’s long strides, ‘my spies followed the thief to a student’s house. I knew this scholar, one of the Rikkenburgs, from my studies. He had even given a dissertation on *The Blessed Ones*. I knew that as soon as this petty burglar found out about the true powers of the painting, he would try to take it for himself. I had to find out what he was planning.’

The group reached a long set of stairs, and began the descent into the bowels of the manor. Eretz continued his report. ‘We were fortunate that the thief, having somehow evaded the men I set to tailing him, came straight to the student’s room with the painting just as we were finishing up! Of course, I had considered the possibility that he might return...’

The count stopped and turned, directing a piercing look at his excited protégé. ‘You took a considerable risk, against my explicit wishes, doing this. You were extremely lucky that things have worked out as they did.’ Romanov spoke briskly, with controlled malice. Jurgen seemed forgotten. ‘There are more important things to consider now. Be silent!’

The party descended the remainder of the staircase in a hush, only the sound of their footsteps on the ancient stone filling the charged silence. At the base of the stairs, lit by guttering torches, stood a large wine-cellar, containing rows of dusty bottles on racks. Romanov gestured to Eretz, who walked sullenly to the opposite wall and lifted a small flagstone to reveal a short, steel lever. Eretz struggled briefly, then with a grating of stone on stone, a section of the cellar wall swung ponderously outwards.

Beyond lay an unusual sight, a chamber of beauty and horror. One half of the room was adorned with the sweeping silks, extravagant furniture, and fine candelabras common to the rest of the manor.

The other half, set on a cold stone floor, was filled with aesthetically-placed instruments of torture. Jurgen could discern a few of the usual suspects: the rack, vices designed to fit various appendages, and an iron maiden, its exterior decorated with a naked woman carved in alarming detail. Many of the remaining devices were far more bizarre and exotic, and Jurgen could only guess at their uses – though he suspected that guesses would soon be unnecessary.

At the opposite end of the chamber, two men were carefully arranging the covered painting on a large easel, which stood before an altar of stone draped with a silk cloth.

A small jade statuette of a beautiful androgynous figure, a cruel smile upon its

lips, stood on the altar, its feet immersed in a low stone dish containing a dark liquid. Jurgen felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as a feeling of deepest dread filled him.

Jurgen was manhandled over and deftly tied to a large crossbeam planted into the bare stone. At a gesture from Romanov, Jurgen's minder exited the chamber, the stone door rumbling shut behind him. The count turned to Jurgen.

'Listen carefully, vermin. You are about to witness something so wondrous I doubt your petty little mind can even comprehend it. Enjoy the privilege, for your death will soon follow, even as my everlasting life is assured.'

Romanov turned away, and walked purposefully to the painting, the two servants respectfully standing aside. Meanwhile, Eretz had taken a short flaxen whip from a rack of tools on the wall, and was walking slowly towards Jurgen, a coy smile playing across his face.

The first blow caught Jurgen unprepared. A casual flick of Eretz's wrist sent the point of the whip stinging across the thief's right cheek. Jurgen gasped and stifled a cry. A second flick lashed above his left eye, sending blood trickling down his face. This time Jurgen did cry out, equally from despair as from pain. Romanov, who had been stooped in an examination of the painting, turned in annoyance.

'Stop that, Eretz! You can entertain yourself with your trivial games, or you can observe history in the making.'

The count stepped back from the painting, studying it with the eye of an aesthete while Eretz looked on respectfully. Jurgen, blinking away blood, was also drawn to the picture within the frame, his eyes widening in horror at what he saw there. The image was of a forest glade with a shallow pool, in which figures bathed and lounged around in various states of undress. All of the figures were attended by oddly-proportioned red-skinned Daemons, who appeared to cater to all the whims and desires of their human masters. The image was disturbing enough to Jurgen, but what induced such terror in him was a figure he recognised within the painting. Even from this

distance, Jurgen could clearly make out the merchant, Grubach, lounging by the pool. His face was plastered with a strained grin, but his eyes stared wildly from the canvas in horror and desperation.

Neither Eretz nor Romanov seemed to notice anything amiss. Romanov produced a ceremonial knife from the folds of his robe, and held forth his left arm. He carefully made a light cut, catching the flow of blood on his finger. He studied the crimson drops for a moment before stepping towards the painting. Unnoticed, Jurgen struggled with his bonds, testing for a weakness.

'Immortality is mine!' Romanov cried theatrically, and smeared his blood onto the canvas.

For a moment nothing happened, and Romanov glanced about uncertainly. A light mist then began to seep from the painting, and the frame seemed to glow slightly in the candlelight. The bloody smear began to sizzle, seeping slowly into the canvas. The count stepped back in wonder and a low hum filled the air. The canvas appeared to pulse, the image distending, and abruptly two figures flowed out of the painting, forming before the awed count. They resembled the Daemons in the picture: tall, spindly red-skinned creatures, with wide grins painted onto their distorted faces. Jurgen redoubled his efforts, and was rewarded with a loosening of his left wrist's bonds.

The two creatures spoke as one, their horrible sensual voices echoing through the room: '*Lord Slaanesh is grateful for your sacrifice – the eternal service of your immortal soul!*'

Romanov stood in stunned horror as the two creatures seized him by the shoulders. One of the guards, prompted into desperate action by the plight of his master, leapt at a Daemon with a desperate sword swing. The creature reached out, easily seized the guard's arm with one long clawed hand and twisted it into an unnatural angle. A languid swipe of razor-sharp claws separated the man's head from his body, and he collapsed to the ground.

Eretz and the remaining servant looked on in shocked disbelief as their master was dragged, screaming, pleading, into the

accursed painting, flesh flowing like vapour, until all three figures were gone. The room was filled with a palpable silence, though a lingering aftershock remained, like the ringing in the ears after a blow to the head.

Jurgen took his chance. Twisting his freed left arm, he plunged his hand into his clothing, snatching his last remaining knife, hidden on his inner right thigh. Jurgen quickly cut himself free from his constraints, as Eretz and the guard stood staring at the painting in disbelief.

Jurgen lunged forwards and despatched the guard expertly. Eretz span to face the thief, white fury suffusing his face, and lifted his whip. Jurgen raised his arm to defend against the coming strike, only to find his extremity suddenly entrapped in the whip's coil. Eretz yanked the whip, sending Jurgen sprawling on the cold stone floor.

'It's all over now, Eretz,' Jurgen implored from his place on the floor, 'It was Romanov's mistake. There's no need for us to kill each other.'

'You cannot possibly understand!' Eretz screamed with rage. 'You are nothing! *Nothing!*'

Jurgen received a painful kick to the ribs. He gasped, then jerked the whip from Eretz's hand, rolling quickly away across the floor. He scrambled to his feet as Eretz charged. Jurgen's desperate stab pierced Eretz's shoulder, but did little to stop the maddened acolyte, who seized him by the shoulders and slammed him backwards into the stone wall. Jurgen's head bounced off the chiselled rock, and he slumped to the ground, stunned. A savage kick to his jaw flattened him, blood and pain exploding in his mouth.

Jurgen pushed himself upright, shaking his blurred vision clear, to see that Eretz had picked up a heavy, shoulder-high candelabra, and was advancing intently. Jurgen blinked, attempting to clear the blood from his eyes. He raised his hand up protectively in front of him, the bloodied dagger still clasped in it.

Eretz laughed maniacally at his feeble resistance. 'Good night,' he said, hefting the candelabra.

Jurgen looked up, sighing painfully. His

blurred eyes strayed as he awaited the final blow, and came to rest on the malevolent painting sitting just a few feet away. Jurgen continued to stare, as a curious thought struck him. Eretz, puzzled by Jurgen's behaviour, followed his gaze, then quickly turned back, eyes wide as he reached the same thought a moment too late.

Jurgen tensed his arm and flung the bloodied dagger – a wild, inaccurate throw, but it found its mark. The knife clattered against the painting, blood spattering across the canvas, before falling to the floor. Figures began to move within the painting.

Eretz emitted a scream of rage and despair. Jurgen closed his eyes tightly, though he could not stop his ears to the terrible sounds that filled the room.



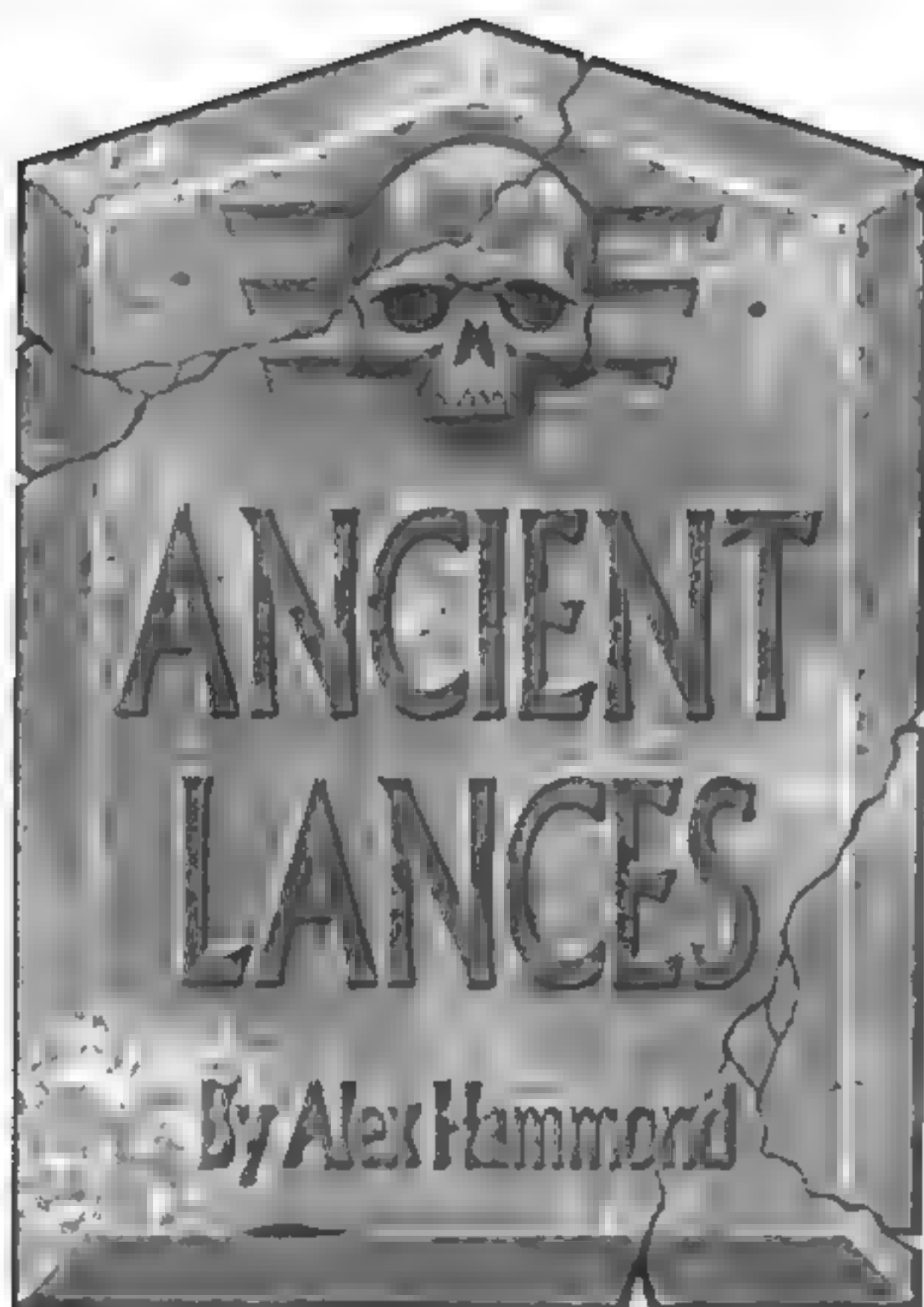
WHEN HE OPENED his eyes some time later, Jurgen found the room silent, except for the low crackling of a small fire on the plush carpet, started by the fallen candelabra. Jurgen got to his feet slowly, steadying himself against the wall. He stumbled forward towards the painting, then stopped himself. He carefully cleaned his bloodied hands on his clothes, and then gingerly picked the painting up, setting it down on the growing flames.

The search for a mechanism to open the door sent him into a brief panic, but at last the lever was found. Just as he was stepping through the open door, a terrible wail sounded behind him, and he turned back briefly.

From the burning canvas then emanated all manner of horrific screams, some monstrously alien, some undeniably human. He ran, blundering though the wine cellar and scrambling up the stone steps. As he fled, he was certain he heard the anguished cries of Eretz howling in agony once more.

And then, at last, Jurgen stumbled through the still manor house and out into the chill night. The first wisps of flame were already rising into the dark sky behind him. ●





A DRY HEAT slid over the barren wastes with the rising of the sun. As light pushed at the edges of the darkness, the shadows fell away to reveal the dead in their many hundreds. Dakat City was nothing but rubble and corpses. Broken steel and concrete lay spread out on the baking sand. Only carrion insects moved about the devastation, nibbling on flesh, darting across dead eyes.

Al'Kahan looked out across the sea of carnage. His eye did not blink. Heavy artillery must have pounded the city for hours. The bunkers were torn open. The network of hives beneath the city would be running with blood. It would pool in the lower places. The smell of it would remain there forever.

His mare stirred beneath him. She had a heart of iron but liked the slaughter of innocents no more than he. Al'Kahan turned to face his men. Veteran tribesmen all, they were the best sons his home world had to offer. *Each should know his steed as well as his steel.* The philosophy of his people. The horse was their kin, their companion. Without it they could never prevail.

The battalion looked across at Al'Kahan, their dark eyes and rough hearts moved by the scene before them. They wore the marks of their clans upon their cloaks,

carved from bone and stitched onto the hides of great bison. Beads of honour hung from their beards, holding the complex plaits in place. Al'Kahan spoke, his voice breaking the stillness of the spent battle field.

'This is our first and last day. Last, for we shall no longer be sworn to the sword of the Imperium. First, for we shall die or succeed. To die is to pass on to the plains of our ancestors, to join them in the great hunt. To succeed is to be given a world to make our own.'

Al'Kahan stood upon the back of his horse, so that he could see the entire body of men. Lifting his eye patch he spoke. 'We own each battle. It has cost us one and all, brother man and brother horse. We are the Sons of Atilla. Our destiny stands before us.'

Al'Kahan dropped into his saddle and pulled hard on his reins. His mare stood high on her hind legs and kicked at the air. In a second, the silence was broken for the last time on that day. Two hundred hooves struck the ground in unison, sending carrion beetles scrabbling and used shells flying. Al'Kahan's Atillan Rough Riders were on the move again.

They swept over the broken lands, skirting between battlefields. As they rode, they found only the dead, but the tracks of their enemies were all too clear. Heavy tanks and many infantry: this was an enemy unconcerned with subterfuge, an army of fire and iron.

'Honourable Al'Kahan?' A giant tribesman, Tulk, rode beside him, livid face scars denoting many kills.

'Speak, brother.'

'Those who lead the Prakash XIIth have made contact. They're being surrounded. Cut off on the salt flats. They will make their stand there.' Tulk grunted in disdain.

'They will fall if surrounded.'

'If the spirit of the hawk is with us, we may have speed enough to aid them,' the large tribesman said, looking to the sky.

'Indeed, if we fight with our ancestors by our side we could break the enemy's line. Create a weak point, from which they may make their push. Use the communicator: let them know that the sons of Atilla will save their hideless backs once again.'

CRESTING AN embankment, the riders looked out over the Great Lake. Its life blood dried up, it shimmered in the haze of a high sun. A dark column snaked like a viper across the salt flats, heading inexorably for a much smaller, ragged mass. Al’Kahan paused briefly, his men arriving close beside him as he looked through binoculars at the forces ahead. He turned and called out.

‘The enemy artillery is their key. Like a fist from heaven it has smashed every settlement we have passed. We must outflank it and destroy it. Our ancestors are with us today, this I know for a wind has travelled with us across this barren land. Feel it at your heels when you strike for their heart.’ Al’Kahan raised his lance and readied it in the harness of his saddle. ‘Save your lances for their artillery. Do not engage their main force. Ride like the wind, my brothers.’

Al’Kahan let out a deep, wordless cry, his voice holding strong. The riders followed suit, their voices rising high above the thick heat. Al’Kahan felt a shiver pass through his bones, electric like the thrill of a kill. His lance felt good in his hand, like it had always been there. He was first to break the war cry and set his steed to battle. The pounding of the hooves rang about the great expanse. Tulk screamed their position down the communicator array on his back. A flare from the Prakash XIIth rose high into the air. A reply signal, they were prepared.

Al’Kahan’s heart felt as though it was keeping pace with the rushing horses. The closer the enemy, the tighter he gripped his reins. His cloak spun and twisted in the air about him. His eyes wept with the sting of the rising salt from the flats and the wind in his eyes.

A shell landed close by. It sent a horse and rider spiralling through the air, the mare whinnying as it slammed to the ground. It died on impact. Its rider fell beneath a hundred hooves. Honed in battle craft the men spread wide. Another shell fell amidst them, its shrapnel slicing past flesh and fur. But artillery fire could not compete with the riders’ speed.

They were closing on their greatest threat. Ahead, foul Chaos Marines, their

ancient armour warped and corrupt, skirted like giant cockroaches behind their machines. Here they nested, chittering, calling and screaming in a language that bore into Al’Kahan’s skull, as though it was trying to devour him. All around them, screaming hordes of cultists howled insane hymns to their warped masters.

Al’Kahan’s warrior’s heart shuddered to look upon them all. He gripped his studded reigns tighter, letting the iron studs tug at his flesh. The pain help distract him from the abominations ahead. Airborne jet bikes tore the sky apart as they ripped forward from within the enemy’s column. Lasfire and bolter shells began to rain down upon the riders. Men were thrown from their horses, the beasts remaining riderless within the charge. Al’Kahan leapt the body of a dead horse, its skull ruptured, a rider trapped beneath it.

The first of the riders had reached the enemy’s line. They did well, their steeds ploughing through the line of cultists. Some were cut down, spurts of blood slicing through the air like jets of steam.

Tulk led a second wave. His men had stowed their lances in favour of lasguns. Every shot rang true, but few penetrated. In answer, hot metal shells ploughed into his unit. Horses fell, colliding with one another on their way to the ground. A few riders were able to leap free, but most were cut down or crushed beneath their mounts, their bodies dropping like building blocks smashed aside by a child. Their momentum had been stopped. Men had to take up cover behind the dead and dying. The Chaos hordes cared only for the spilling of blood, and rained fire upon dead and living alike.

Al’Kahan wheeled around and drove his unit hard towards his fallen comrades. To remain stationary in battle was to offer victory to the enemy. Vaulting the piled dead, Al’Kahan rode along the Chaos line. He swung his lance like a staff, keeping its explosive tip from striking. The fallen raiders took his cue and charged at the enemy. Atilans rushed the armoured Chaos Marines, their furs soaked in blood. Many were thrown high by the sheer force of the enemy’s powered armour, but a few blows found their mark.

'We're slowing!' Al'Kahan cried, circling the fray and rounding up those riders which remained mounted. The ground shook, and for all but a moment, cultist and Rough Rider alike paused. Barbed tanks, bristling with weapons and equipped with savage scythes and ploughs, began to advance upon the Imperial Guard.

'Pull out! Move, damn you!' Al'Kahan called, leaning down from his saddle to snatch at the grasping hand of a fallen raider.

'Thank you, brother.'

Tulk, Al'Kahan's lieutenant grinned back at him, his sharpened teeth streaked with own blood. It welled up from a gash on his tattooed face, a fresh memento of this battle and one that Tulk would certainly cherish.

'They're not too tough once you've cracked them open!' he grinned.

The enemy tanks were almost upon them. Men were still trying to scramble free of the fray onto stray horses and the backs of their colleagues.

Al'Kahan swore. 'We need time.'

'It would be a honour, Al'Kahan,' Tulk said.

Al'Kahan kicked hard into the flanks of his horse and rode high over the mounting dead. He charged straight towards the first of the tanks. Flanks dripping with sweat and blood, Al'Kahan's mare struggled forwards, irregular hoof falls alerting him to her waning strength.

'One more charge, Daughter of Atilla,' he called to her.

Tulk stood upon the horse's back, arms steadying himself against Al'Kahan. He snatched a bulging satchel from the saddle and crouched. Al'Kahan rode alongside the approaching tank, its cruel blades spinning but an arm's distance away. Tulk paused for a moment only, then the giant tribesman flung himself forwards onto the grinding vehicle. Al'Kahan kicked at his mount and they burst forwards, throwing salt high into the air as they galloped around the rear of the machine. Tulk scrambled up the top of the tank and threw himself back as a hatch burst open. Al'Kahan snatched a throwing disc from his belt. He threw the blade with abandon,

not caring whether he cut down the marine or give Tulk a painless death. It ricocheted off the hull and up into the cultist's face. The man fell, gun pumping, back into the tank's innards. Amid screams, the vehicle spun wide and bucketed right. Tulk pulled a grenade from the satchel and popped its pin. He threw it deep into the machine and looked about, wild frenzy in his eyes.

Al'Kahan spurred his mount on. Tulk threw himself down a little ahead of his comrade. An explosion ripped the tank open, throwing Tulk into Al'Kahan's horse's flank. All three collapsed to the ground. Two more tanks pressed onwards. Dazed, Al'Kahan turned, trying to catch sight of his men. A dull pain at the base of his spine drew his attention to his legs, trapped beneath the horse.

'Tulk?' The tribesman did not stir. The tanks rumbled on towards the Atillan commander. Al'Kahan scrambled desperately at the satchel at Tulk's side but could not reach it. He reached back and caught hold of his lance. Using it, the Atillan prodded gently at the satchel, praying the explosive tip would not explode, setting the grenades off. The surface of the salt flats came away in large plates as the satchel dragged slowly towards him. The noise of the tank filled his entire body. Al'Kahan slowly drew the satchel close enough to open.

The shadow of the tank fell across him. Scythes and blades cut up the corpse of Tulk, harvesting flesh. Al'Kahan drove his hand deep into the satchel and pulled a pin. At the same moment, he braced the lance hard against the carved insignia on his armoured breastplate. Al'Kahan threw the satchel beneath the lead tank and let the vehicle's plough catch the tip of his lance. Flame and sulphur engulfed him for an instant as the lance tip detonated, throwing him backwards and away from the exploding tanks.

Al'Kahan floundered, tumbling backwards across the salt flats, unable to slow his momentum. He prepared for the sharp, crushing pain of hooves. Instead he found himself wrapped in something soft. The smell of home... fried bison and corn bread. Was this the hereafter?

Al'Kahan opened his eyes. Wrapped about him was a thick fur cloak. Like a net he had been scooped from the ground, two young riders supporting him between horses.

'We have you, honourable commander,' a young rider with tangled braids said.

'A steed! I need a fast mare. We must destroy their artillery,' Al'Kahan wheezed.

'Great Commander...'

'I know I'm wounded. My chest is pierced, my life blood falls to the soil. If we do not fight we will lose this battle and my name will be dishonoured. Better to die than to live dishonoured.'

Ten more riders arrived to regroup, some carrying additional men.

'Gather the lances! And get me a horse!' Al'Kahan screamed.

An Atillan dismounted while others circled, sweeping down from their saddles to snatch up the unused lances of fallen riders. They lay, scattered like matchsticks, across the battle field, daring the foolish to tread upon their explosive tips.

Al'Kahan propped himself up in a saddle. The sucking wound in his chest was like a blow hole, bursting forth blood and pain.

'Son of Atilla,' Al'Kahan called to the dismounted rider. 'Get behind me. Take your clan tassels and hold them hard to my wound.'

The rider held Al'Kahan tight, his grip stemming the flow. 'You hold my old life in your hands. Quite literally.' Al'Kahan coughed, feeling his life's blood wearing thin.

No cry was given. In this moment, actions spoke louder than any horn. Al'Kahan spurred the new steed forwards, the young warrior on his back bracing both his wound and bearing several lances. The remaining riders followed suit, their steeds catching up with the old commander. They spread out with an unspoken synchronicity, pulling alongside one another. A line of riders, thirty strong, churned the earth as they flung themselves hard at the enemy.

'Ready lances!' Al'Kahan commanded. The artillery loomed closer. It was larger than he had expected. Giant cannons pointed skywards, seeming to stroke the

bellies of the clouds. Mortars with gates as dark as the mouth of the Warp grinned like Daemons. Tracked platforms churned up the ground beneath them, ripping huge trenches into the ground. These machines were eager to belch their deadly shells upon the good men of the Emperor.

As they rode, the Atillans passed the lances from hand to hand with spider-grace. All were equipped twice over. The Chaos Marines and their cultist forces caught sight of the Rough Riders. They scrambled low across the ground, throwing themselves hard behind the rare pieces of cover that jutted, like blast craters, from the ground.

'Steady!' Al'Kahan called, air escaping both from his mouth and the wound. His head spun, oxygen depleted.

A barrage of laser and lead whipped across the riders. Explosions from mortars and grenades rent the ground.

'Now!' Al'Kahan cried. On this mark, every man slid effortlessly to the right side of his horse, bodies pressed flat against his steed's flanks. Some horses were hit, some fell, but more rode on.

'For Atilla!' one warrior cried as the cavalry swept high and hard over the enemy lines. Ignoring their assailants, the riders doubled their speed. The pounding of hooves echoed deep into the earth. Sweat and blood were swept from horse and man, leaving thin red wakes in the shimmering heat. The riders lowered their lances. Artillery crews, still scrambling to load their cannons, scrambled for hand weapons. The Atillans let forth a single war cry, twenty sounding as though they were a hundred.

The explosive-tipped lances found their mark. Thick iron plates were torn from machines, hulls dripping with wires, gutted. Explosion after explosion, like a string of firecrackers, burst out across the battlefield. Rounds of ammunition, like rain from the heavens, filled the air. Al'Kahan threw grenade after grenade at stockpiles of munitions. The rear of the Chaos army was engulfed in cleansing flame. Burning tracks and fragments of metal still fell as the Atillans moved on to cut down the fleeing.

AL'KAHAN RAN his hands across his chest. It had healed well. The scar was impressive, the largest on his battle-worn torso. The soft sounds of the battlecruiser filled the room. Transparent plasteel windows, like the hollow eyes of the dead, looked out across the stars. Al'Kahan stared at a sharp blue nebula, crackling with lightning and flame. The lulling hum of the starship's engines and the glorious scene before him made Al'Kahan almost long to remain in deep space, almost.

He looked down at the large Imperial Eagle that hung from his chest from chains of gold. He could feel its weight through the layers of fur and hessian he wore. His cloak bore further trophies and medals, their shining metal like strange ticks amongst the pelts. Al'Kahan considered his reflection in the window. Broad plainsman's hat, trimmed with fur, single wild warrior's eye, long braided hair. He could hardly distinguish between his dark black locks and the snow leopard's mane he wore about the top of his cloak. Both were worn with age and dark from a thousand blood stains.

'Commander!' A voice from behind.

Al'Kahan turned about slowly. A Commissar – dark leather coat, black peaked cap, trimmed and adorned with silver skulls.

'Commander. I trust you have healed well.'

'Indeed, Commissar Streck.'

'Your Imperial Seal fits you well.' The Commissar turned towards the window.

'It feels good about my neck.'

'As well it should. You have served the Emperor well.' The Commissar pulled a crank, shielding the window and throwing the room into neon bright.

'A hundred battles.'

'Time for you to take your place as lord of your own province on Dagnar II.'

'I look forward to such an honour.'

'Really?'

'I could be no less certain.'

'Interesting. I thought your people longed from their homeworld more than any other. The Ice Warriors of Valhalla long for the sun, the Alderian Shock Fighters

hate their deathworld, the Gorchak Fire Sentinels thirst. But the Atillans never tire of hunting bison, warring amongst their clans... or at least that's what the Adeptus Ministorum have always held.'

'I'm sure they have their reasons.'

'Most assuredly.' Commissar Streck turned and made to leave the room, then paused. 'However... you have an irregular choice. In three days we will dock with your home world. A unique opportunity. We need to take on new steeds and other supplies for your founding, then head off to Dagnar II, and from there on to Olstar Prime. If you were to stay you would not be dishonoured. You could return to your hunting grounds.'

'Why?'

'Let me simply say that I have long maintained that with time a warrior of the Emperor comes to know only battle. I look forward to being able to prove this in a report to the Ministorum. A... test case, if you will.'

'I see.' Al'Kahan looked down at the seal on his chest.

'The ship will dock for a week only,' Streck said. 'You have your Emperor's blessing.'

'One week, Commander,' Commissar Streck called from across one of the many loading bays of the massive space vessel. Al'Kahan did not turn to acknowledge the man. Rather he waded through the air, thick with fuel, towards the towering bay doors. He longed to feel the soft soil of his homeworld beneath his feet, not lifeless steel.

Al'Kahan's furs, bundled upon his back, weighed heavily on his shoulders. Filled with gifts and trophies from the Emperor, they were foreign objects on Atillan soil. A twisting path of conduits and gantries crowded and cluttered Al'Kahan's progress. The Emperor's ship, even now, with its foul vapours and grinding noises, tried to hold him back from his homeland. The land to which his soul would be forever joined.

Al'Kahan reached the bay's vast external doors. Two men from the Prakash XIIth – boys only – stood at their stations by a smaller, man-sized doorway. One stepped before him. Al'Kahan pulled his papers

from his coat and pushed them hard into the young guard's forehead. The man stumbled backwards. Al'Kahan swept his feet from beneath him with a solid throw from his leg and spun about letting his heavy furs catch the other in the neck. The second fell to the ground just seconds after his companion. The papers, heavy with seals, fluttered down to land on the ground between the men. Al'Kahan stepped through and was struck by the winds of home. He held his breath and strode out onto the sloping walkway, then leapt down into the knee high grasses of the open plains of Atilla.

The massive space vessel towered from the grasslands. It would block out much of the sun as it rose, its shadows turning around the countryside like a giant sundial. The long grasses surged and crested in the warm evening breeze. They washed around Al'Kahan, slapping against his thighs as he strode on. The ship had put down next to a small Imperial outpost, which huddled in a wide, blasted-earth clearing. More a collection of scattered administrative buildings than an organised base, the buildings looked like squat dung heaps.

Worse still, like buzzing flies, Atillans were gathered in groups about the buildings. Approaching them, Al'Kahan saw that there were more than he'd initially thought. Many lay huddled together drunkenly amidst pools of bile and filth. Some shivered around small fires. As Al'Kahan drew near, he saw that they did not cook desert hen or bison side, but something else, something more akin to a rodent.

Mongrels and beggars scuttled out of Al'Kahan's way as he strode on. The deeper into the quagmire of scorched earth and hastily erected bunkers he went, the more Al'Kahan worried he would never escape it. It was as though he were entering the heart of the dark plains, that dire place to which the dishonoured dead passed on. Smaller spacecraft, not bearing the glorious eagle of the Imperium, had landed here too. Rogue traders? Mercenaries? Pirates? Al'Kahan could not be certain. All that he could tell was that these men were making a living off his people. From out of the side of one of these ships

a pledge trader was at work. Beggars and wounded queued in a soulless line outside the small craft. A dark, heavy-set man was passing out food in battered tin bowls.

'Sister, what are you doing?' Al'Kahan leant in to talk to a woman in the queue.

'I am hungry, brother.'

'Where is your clan, your husband?'

'He left to fight for the Sky Emperor. I came here to find peace.'

'I see no peace.'

'Can I help you?' A trader type in long, mesh-armour robes strode forward to stand face to face with Al'Kahan.

'You have made beggars of my people,' Al'Kahan sneered

'We offer them food in return for performing small tasks on our ship up in orbit,' the trader said pulling aside his coat. 'Join the queue or leave.' He revealed the handle of a laspistol underneath his garments.

'I know what this is,' Al'Kahan said to the assembled tribespeople. 'This is a ploy. These men are slavers, they will take you up to their ship to imprison the strongest of you and slay the others!'

'What? That is simply untrue!' The trader turned to face the crowd, his hands held open in a gesture of platitude.

Al'Kahan grabbed the trader by the back of the neck and thrust him forward to the ground. Throwing back the man's coat, Al'Kahan revealed a set of manacles at his belt.

'Look!' he called to the crowd. 'What merchant has need for these?'

Al'Kahan drove the slaver's face further into the ground. Others drew near. Al'Kahan snatched the man's laspistol from beneath his coat. 'Back off!' Al'Kahan growled holding it to the back of the floored slavers head. 'Return to your tribes!' he screamed at the beggars, 'This is no way for Atillans to live!'

Al'Kahan spat to the ground and strode into the night. The blank faces watched him go in silence. No one moved, no one left.

The eyes of his ancestors were beginning to appear in the heavens above him. He still recalled each pattern, each constellation, from that time many years ago when, with a boy's foolish notions of

the glory of war, he had set forth into those stars to fight for the Emperor God. His ancestors would guide him, guide his own eyes to the hunting grounds of his people. Al'Kahan imagined what they would be doing – perhaps feasting after a great hunt, gathered around the fires. He would walk from the light of each hearth to meet with old friends and the new warriors. Young men keen to gain their first scars on the field of battle. It would be so good to be back.



THE NIGHTS HAD passed slowly. Al'Kahan slept alongside the tired old mare he'd bought from a trader back at the outpost. The animal was as scarred and wrinkled as Al'Kahan himself. Its breath was shallow when it slept, a constant reminder of his own mortality. He found he had somehow lost the knack of lighting a fire, and had had to use Imperial Guard-issue flame flares to keep himself warm.

There were few signs of his clan on the plains – the marks made by the herds were old, and there were no fresh horses prints either. On the third night, though, he came across an old camp, tents bunt to the ground, and clan banners buried in the dirt. There were no bodies. Amidst the charred remains, Al'Kahan found a lasgun, its charge burnt out. It bore no markings. Had his people taken to using the weapons of the Imperium?

On the fourth night, Al'Kahan wound his way along Kapak Canyon's massive ridges. It was a wide gulf, as though the finger of some god had stripped back the earth revealing its inner workings. In the valley there were channels like arteries, boulders and outcrops like cancers and ancient caves like hollow sockets. If his clan had been attacked this would be their place of refuge. It had been that way for hundred of years. Only the Hawk's Shadow clan knew of the tunnels and the ridges and could hide here for many days. In a hidden valley, through the disguised arch of a rocky outcrop, he saw at last the familiar tents of his clan. They were smaller than he recalled, more ramshackle. A few

mongrels fought over a bone in the moonlight. He could see no guards.

Al'Kahan gritted his teeth and dismounted. He strode on, his arms wrapped tight around the fur bundle he had brought from the ship. The dogs ran away barking into the night as he approached. A young Atillan, facial scars still fresh, stepped from the shadows, his sabre drawn.

'Back off,' Al'Kahan mumbled.

'You are in the territory of the Hawk's Shadow Clan.' The boy stepped closer, bringing his sabre to bear. 'You will back off.'

'I am Al'Kahan. I am one of the Hawk's Shadow.'

'There is no one by that name amongst our clan.'

'You are too young to know any better.' Al'Kahan proceeded to continue past the boy

'Drop what you hold or my sword will drink of your blood.' The boy snarled.

'No. I am Al-Kahan!'

The boy lunged at him. The old warrior stepped aside, grabbed hold of the boy's arm and smartly lifted upwards. The boy let out a high scream, dropping his sabre, and clutched at his shoulder joint.

'It'll snap back in,' Al'Kahan sneered.

Taking up the fallen sword, Al'Kahan strode towards the nearest hut. Tribespeople had run out at the screaming of the boy. The warrior slashed back the curtain across the entrance to the tent.

'Alyshfa!' Al'Kahan called for his wife.

A battered tribesman stood up, casting aside his furs. His face and body were scarred and wan.

Al'Kahan slit open another tent. She was not here either. A woman sat surrounded by many children her face worn, her eyes red from crying. The babes were thin, they began to cry and scream.

Al'Kahan entered more tents. With each slice of the sabre, the tragedy of his tribe was revealed to him. Outsiders slept with tribesmen. Stinking carcasses, some many days old, were being used for food. Horses were lame.

'Alyshfa!' Al'Kahan called, slashing open another one of the wretched hovels. A man sat bolt upright from beneath a

pound of furs, a terrified look in his eyes. There was a familiar woman's form at his side.

'Alyshfa! Your husband has returned!' Al'Kahan yelled as the man leapt up and snatched at a hunting lance resting high against the roof.

Al'Kahan brought his sabre down on the tribesman's outstretched hand. It fell to the floor. The tribesman let out a howl. Al'Kahan grabbed him by his braids and threw his naked frame out the door.

'Al'Kahan!' a sombre-eyed woman, her hair greying, shouted back at him. Her skin read like life's map, a map Al'Kahan could hardly read. He half-recognised her as she snatched hold of his hand.

Al'Kahan spun hastily to face the tribesmen entering his door and shoved Alyshfa back onto the bed. One of the advancing tribesman swung hard towards Al'Kahan's head. He ducked and wrenched a fur rug from the ground, tripping the tribesman who crashed through a large water vase. The floor flooded. Another man rushed Al'Kahan. He stepped into the warrior's path and smashed the hilt of his sabre into his face.

'Come on, you whelps!' Al'Kahan barked out of the hut. 'Let's see how many it takes until you show me your respect!'

Suddenly he felt a sharp pain across the back of his skull. Staggering around he saw Alyshfa above him, a heavy iron pot held tightly in her hand, a streak of his blood on its hard base.



AL'KAHAN OPENED his eyes. Above him he saw blankets hanging from the support beams of the leather tent. His head was throbbing. He lay on the ground in the damp furs. Alyshfa sat on the ground beside him, holding a sabre to his neck – the sabre he had given her on the day he left.

She had aged more than he. Her eyes were as though they had seen the horrors of the Warp, her hair streaked grey and knotted. She still had a noble bearing, but it seemed as though she was struggling to maintain it, to save face before him.

'You hit me.' Al'Kahan reached to feel the crown of his head.

'You were destroying my tent.'

'You are my wife,' Al'Kahan mumbled. He could taste the blood from his cut lip.

'Was! I was your wife.' Alyshfa placed the sword at her side. 'When a wife's husband departs on a sky ship, she becomes widowed. She may choose a new husband after the time of mourning.'

'You are no longer widowed. I have returned.'

'I mourned your passing. A fool, you took to the stars. You fought for the Sky Emperor. You left. What more is there to say?'

'I have returned to my people. I see that they need me.' Al'Kahan sat up slowly. It dawned on him that he was arguing with her as though he had only departed yesterday. She had her temper still, as he had his. Some things on Atilla had not changed.

'We are fine without you, Al'Kahan. Your place is no longer amongst us.'

'All the traditions have been forgotten. I was attacked by a boy, too stupid to know the rules of hospitality. Who is headman now?'

'Po'Thar is dead. Like I said, a lifetime has passed since your leaving. Our tribe is no longer glorious. We starve, our tribesmen are but boys. Traditions are our last concern.'

'That saddens me.' Al'Kahan stood gingerly. 'It is a pity. Our traditions are what make us Atillans.'

'There are new traditions. Things are changing.' Alyshfa handed Al'Kahan a damp rag. He placed it on his head.

'They have changed all too much. Where are all the men?'

'They rode against the warlord, Talthar. Our herd was stolen and they sought to bring it back.'

Al'Kahan paced around the perimeters of the tent, trying to clear his muddled head. He peered outside the flap. A crowd had gathered outside, they stood back from the tent as they caught sight of Al'Kahan. There were very few able warriors, ten at the most.

'Our warriors were defeated?' he asked

Alyshfa, turning back to the room.

'Survivors told of a fortress, of weapons bought from sky traders. They rode against it and tried to attack, but could not assail its walls or defeat their guns.'

'Where is your... husband?'

'With the wisewoman. She is mending his wound.'

'I can pay for a new hand.'

'He is proud. He will neither take your money nor let a machine replace his flesh.'

Al'Kahan regarded the women he had only known as a girl. She wore the sorrow of his tribe like a veil, but beneath it he could still see some inkling of pride.

He strode out of the tent. The crowd staggered backwards, some men reaching for sabres. Al'Kahan held up his hands. They stared intently at the figure who had arrived a frenzied madman.

'Come dawn,' Al'Kahan said, 'come dawn we will make plans to renew our tribe.'



WELCOME, THE once-proud tribes of Kapak Valley.' Al'Kahan stood upon the back of a horse, looking out over a rabble of wounded men, boys and women who had turned against the traditions. 'I am Al'Kahan. I have served the Sky Emperor and have returned to rejoin my people. Here I have found nothing but sorrow and tears. This warlord refuses the ways of our people by plundering and stealing bison and setting rock and stone to earth to make fortress. These plains belong to all. Our ancestors divided them equally, so that we could all be free to ride the lands and eat of their harvests. This Talthar is an enemy to us all, an enemy to our traditions, to our ancestors.'

The few warriors present stirred in their saddles. Many spat into the earth, their sharpened teeth glinting in the stark light.

'I came home seeking the traditions I had long held in highest honour in my heart. On other worlds Atilans fight, united by their love for their homeland, their brother horse and the freedom to which we aspire. I say that this warlord,

Talthar, is little more than a brigand. I say we ride against him. I say we string him from the gates of his own damned fortress and let the carrion feast on his innards. Through battle we will know the truth. In battle we will find victory. By battle we will save Atilla's soul and restore the tribes to their glory!'

Faces turned away and heads dropped. The ground was stirred by soulless hooves, dragging against the earth.

'Do not turn away! You must trust in the ways of the ancestors. We will overcome this man. He is no Daemon. His fortress is but earth. Our steeds tear up the earth as they ride; his fortress is nothing!'

'It is no use, Al'Kahan.' Alyshfa's husband, Ke'Than, turned to him from his saddle. His dark braids and scarless face betrayed his youth. His eyes were keen and tough, like black pearls. Ke'Than jabbed his stump in the departing crowd's direction. 'Their spirits are broken.'

'They no longer have the hearts of true Atilans.'

'Things have changed.'

'Changed for the worst, Ke'Than.'

'Perhaps, but then nothing lasts for ever.'

Al'Kahan jumped to the ground. He reached down and grabbed a handful of rich, black soil. 'I have travelled to many worlds and one thing never changes. There is always war.' Al'Kahan stood casting the dirt aside. 'If change is what Atilla wants then change is what she will get. Go and talk to them. Tell them I know how to crack open this fortress.'



FEWER HAD COME than before. Al'Kahan looked out into a crowd of faces, grim and unimpressed. He looked to the low ridge above him. There Ke'Than sat, awaiting his instructions.

Al'Kahan turned to the crowd. 'Not even stone is impenetrable.'

He waved his sabre in the air and Ke'Than kicked his steed into life. The beast thundered across the ridge, throwing up earth all about it. Ke'Than gripped hard to the reigns and lowered his hunting lance in the crook of his injured

arm towards a broad boulder before him. The warrior braced himself as a great explosion ripped through the stone. Shards of rock, like leaves from a tree, fell down around the assembled riders.

The crowd gasped.

Al'Kahan held up his own hunting lance. 'I have twenty of these explosive heads. Your lance shafts are not as strong as those of steel, so they will have to be reinforced. But with them we can break open that fortress. We can defeat this warlord.'



THE CHILL WIND of dawn passed through Al'Kahan's hair. It moved the long grasses that grew on the highest parts of each hill. Below him, a morning mist was starting to rise. Around Al'Kahan were gathered fifty riders from the broken clans of Kapak Valley. Riders of varying ages sat atop a mixed rabble of mares and geldings, their faces filled with grim determination. They were few. The boys amongst them had never seen battle, nor ever killed a man.

Al'Kahan turned to face them. His stallion shifted beneath him. His eye passed along the row of riders before them.

'I will not lie. Today, we ride outnumbered. Today, we fight against a superior force, behind walls of stone. Today, we may lose our lives.' Al'Kahan reached around to the furs he'd brought from the starship.

'But these are things you all know.' He started to unwrap the large bundle. 'I promise you this' whilst this day may not be fought in the traditional way, you will not dishonour your ancestors. They will look upon you with great joy – for you fight to free their sons, the founder's children – our brothers who lie in the bowels of that fortress.

'Let me promise you this.' Al'Kahan produced a plasma rifle and several grenades from the furs, their Imperial Guard insignia plainly visible, 'With these weapons we will conquer! We will ride with the force of a thousand and crack open the walls of their fortress like lightning from the heavens. We will split

their heads and bring the full fury of the clans upon them!'

The riders cheered. Al'Kahan swivelled his horse and plunged down into the mist towards the planes in which the fortress sat. White tendrils quickly enveloped him as he dived, near blind, down the steep incline leading to Talthar's fortress. The riders followed into the miasma, the sound of their steeds and beating hearts the only sign that they did not ride alone.

After what seemed like many hours, the ground levelled out and the mists thinned. The fortress, the size of small star cruiser, loomed ahead of them. It was jagged and sinister, and pieces of scrap metal soldered to iron stakes rose in vicious angles from the ground before it. These would slow down the cavalry. Its walls looked climbable, for the stone was roughly hewn – but peppered with murder holes and lookout towers as it was, this would be nigh-on impossible. Al'Kahan's men slowed; struck dumb with apprehension, some began to falter. Strong actions were needed.

Al'Kahan, plasma rifle in hand, unleashed a volley of burning power that ripped through the iron stakes and lit up the entire valley in white light. The tense air was filled with static. His men rallied and rode like the crazed, relying on the experienced warrior's skill with the rifle to destroy the pikes that threatened their charge. Al'Kahan desperately tried to destroy each barricade before his men collided with them, but some riders struck the barbs. But he kept on firing; if the charge was slowed, they would become bottled up and be shot to ribbons.

The riders rode on, the remnants of the deadly barricades now just ash. Men appeared at the fortress walls. Shotguns and rifles added dull staccatos to the high-pitched cry of Al'Kahan's plasma rifle.

'Face away!' Al'Kahan cried as they neared the fortress. Imperial Guard-issue flash grenades rose high into the air, detonating at spaced intervals like fireworks. The men behind the barricade screamed, blinded by the flash. The riders resumed their charge.

'Lances!' Al'Kahan cried out over the sound of his weapon.

The riders obliged, lowering the explosive tipped weapons to face the stone walls. 'Level up!' The riders pulled alongside one another, creating a convincing line. The hooves, like thunder to the lighting of Al'Kahan's weapon. A storm of retribution was in full sway.

Too late, the doors to the fortress opened to release the warlord's own riders. Al'Kahan's men braced themselves as their lances struck the wall. The tips exploded, ripping great holes in the stone. Sharp rubble ripped at their faces and tore at their furs. One rider fell beneath a hail of debris; his mare kept running. The warlord's riders swept around to follow Al'Kahan's men.

'Hawk's Shadow and Desert Thorn take the compound! The other clans with me!' Al'Kahan cried above the havoc. The riders separated. Al'Kahan's force turned and prepared a charge.

The enemy riders had the better speed. 'Keep going!' Al'Kahan called, pulling four grenade pins. He threw low and hard at the oncoming riders. Startled faces broke into screams of fear as the grenades hit the ground and went off, tearing earth and flesh. The enemy charge fell short. Now his riders had the momentum. Horse met horse, rider set upon rider and a desperate battle broke out.

Al'Kahan wielded the plasma rifle as a club, knocking a rider to the ground to be trampled under the churning hooves. Sabres flashed as Al'Kahan's men jostled with the warlord's. The slow press of horse's bodies was like a giant python, gradually constricting around the battlefield. Men desperately clung to their steeds; to fall was to die under this crush. One of the warlord's men made a rush for Al'Kahan, sprinting across the backs of several close-pressed horses. Al'Kahan turned and released a volley from the plasma rifle. It went wide, barely slowing his attacker.

The rider leapt upon Al'Kahan and they both slid towards the ground. His attacker stabbed again and again with a short knife. Al'Kahan felt the blade penetrate his side. Without thinking, he smashed his forehead into the attacker's face. Al'Kahan rolled to one side and let the screaming

man fall beneath the stamping hooves of his enraged mount.

After regaining his saddle, Al'Kahan saw that his men had gained the advantage and had all but finished what remained of the warlord's cavalry. Al'Kahan pulled at the dagger in his side.



THE MEN OF Hawk's Shadow and Desert Thorn hurdled through the holes in the shattered wall and passed into the warlord's compound, Ke'Than at their head. The place was filled with the booty of war; strange machines traded from merchant pirate's lay sprawled about the fort, while coal-black pipes, like spilled entrails, made riding hard. Women and children ran for the mud huts and stone houses that lined the walls. A mass of warriors armed with pistols and sabres rushed from their barricades. They looked shell-shocked and desperate.

Ke'Than snatched his sabre from his saddle and swung it high above his head. With a clean stroke he beheaded an oncoming warrior before the man had a chance to react. Another drew a shotgun on him. The weapon cracked out across the air. It clipped Ke'Than in the shoulder. Barely noticing, Ke'Than brought down his sabre hard. The warrior brought his shotgun up to parry the blow. From the back of the horse the blow was savage. The warrior's wrist snapped, the shotgun singing free from his hands. Both warrior and weapon fell to the ground, the gun misfiring as they collided together. Soft tissue sprayed across Ke'Than's face and he turned away. Around him, his clan had the advantage over the remaining warriors. In the distance, a dark shape appeared on the far side of the melee.

'Who is it?' Al'Kahan arrived at Ke'Than's side.

'Talthar, the warlord,' the other sneered.

Covered in dark furs, criss-crossed with black straps and leather harnesses, Talthar charged forward on the back of a giant black stallion, a whirling chainsword in one hand. Al'Kahan groaned out as the

foreign weapon sliced through sabres and limbs alike. The warlord's face had a crazed look, his scars and toothless grin slick with the blood of Al'Kahan's men. With tearing precision, he cut down five men in but a few seconds.

'Here!' Al'Kahan screamed and drew the warlord's attention. The warlord commenced a charge. Al'Kahan spurred his horse towards him. They crossed the short distance neither slowing, their eyes wild.

Al'Kahan leant and whispered to his mount: 'Brother horse, I thank you for your spirit and blood.'

The warlord was upon him, the chainsword spitting gore. Al'Kahan pulled hard against his mount's reins. The inexperienced creature buckled and fell to the ground, the momentum from its charge causing it to slide hard into Talthar's own steed. The black stallion stumbled over the sliding Al'Kahan. In this instant, Al'Kahan jammed the butt of his plasma rifle against his shoulder and fired. The white blue light, mercury bright, cut up through horse and rider. Talthar screamed as his leg was engulfed in searing agony. His monstrous steed crashed to the ground on top of Al'Kahan.

The old warrior felt a biting pain scream through his leg. Something had torn and his foot was bent at a weird angle. Close by, Talthar howled. He was still alive, covered in the gore of his steed, his chainsword cutting a path through the smouldering flesh about him. Al'Kahan rolled to one side as the savage weapon tore through his cloak. He dragged himself across the ground, his tired arm muscles straining to move his substantial bulk.

'I will have... your head!' Talthar wailed, dragging himself after Al'Kahan.

'You have offended our ancestors! You will die!' Al'Kahan shouted back, looking for a weapon.

'You are no different to me,' the warlord shrieked, swinging the chainsword wildly. 'You offend our ancestors with your alien weapons.'

'Never!' Al'Kahan cried, reaching his plasma rifle and snatching it up.

The warlord swung, the whirling blades of the chainsword spinning furiously

towards Al'Kahan. Al'Kahan fumbled with the rifle. It had not charged fully. He brought the gun up to meet the chainsword, waiting for the biting pain of its serrated teeth. The sword dug deep into the rifle's fuel cell. A flash of white-blue flame leapt up the sword and through the warlord's body. He screamed briefly and collapsed, a charred husk.

Shaking the noise from his head, Al'Kahan looked up through the gore and saw a group of riders assembled above him.

Ke'Than grinned down. 'We are victorious, mighty Al'Kahan. You have restored us to glory!'



ALARGE FIRE burnt high that night. The thick scent of bison meat filled the air for miles around. The broken tribes were united, joined to sing of blood and glory. None would pass to sleep without the aid of ale. One soul was not present: the greatest of the Hawk's Shadow, Al'Kahan. Once the wisewoman had done her work, the old war commander passed from the camp quietly, early in the festivities, his leg braced. Al'Kahan left his old hut and disappeared into the darkness of the Atillan night.

At dusk on the next day, Al'Kahan found himself at the starship, the air fouled with its noxious fumes. By one of the entry gates, a lone figure stood. Al'Kahan dismounted and approached.

'I thought as much,' Commissar Streck said. 'I could see it in your eyes the day that you left.'

'I owe as much. Without the Emperor's weapons, we would not have won.'

'Ah yes. You defeated the tyrant. Good for you.' Streck shifted slightly, his black coat creaked. 'Why not stay and be their leader?'

'I no longer know this place.'

'You are one of us, then?'

'No.' Al'Kahan strode past Streck towards the towering starship. 'I am an Atillan.' ●



Ulric's Children. by Bill King

At the top of the stairs, a window looked down into the courtyard. Felix could see that there were dozens of dead wolves down there and maybe five dead men. Blood reddened the snow. Felix could see that the wooden gate lay wide open. The wolves had come right through it. Then he saw the thing, and he wondered no more. On the roof of the stables lay a grey shape, half man and half wolf. The hairs on the back of Felix's neck prickled. It looked like Ulric's Children were here.

Badlands Skelter's Downhive Monster Show. by Matthew Farrer

Kamusz, the retired bounty hunter, winked at Skelter as he let a tarpaulin fall away as if by accident. Instantly a huge scaly arm shot out, grabbed his jerkin and yanked him toward the bars. There were screams from the crowd. Kamusz yelled and Skelter got in on the act, whacking at the arm with a pistol barrel. It retreated and they put back the tarp. 'That should sell some tickets,' Skelter smiled.

Kamusz nodded, then tapped Skelter's arm as muttering rippled through the onlookers: 'Trouble!'

The Blessed One. by Rani Kellock

Sigmar, stop your hammering! Jurgen Kuhnslieb thought, as the throbbing pain in his head intensified. He winced as the inn door creaked open, admitting a bright lance of sunlight which seemed to pierce his very eyeballs. Jurgen resisted the impulse to turn around, not wishing to attract attention. A young man sauntered up to the bar next to him. He was dressed in well tailored clothes, and clearly in the wrong part of town. 'No need for alarm, sir,' he said. 'I have come here on behalf of my master, who wishes you to... acquire a certain item for him.' The man studied Jurgen levelly, his voice low. 'A very special item.'

Ancient Lances. by Alex Hammond

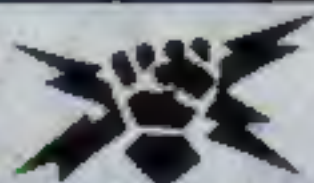
A dry heat slid over the barren wastes with the rising of the sun. Dakat City was nothing but rubble and corpses. Al'Kaban looked out across the sea of carnage. Heavy artillery must have pounded the city for hours. The bunkers beneath the city would be running with blood. It would pool in the lower places. The smell of it would remain there forever. Al'Kaban spoke, his voice breaking the stillness of the spent battlefield. 'Today we shall die or succeed. To die is to pass on to the plains of our ancestors, to join them in the great hunt. To succeed is to be given a world to make our own. We are the Sons of Atilla. Our destiny stands before us!'

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